

# The Last of the Neanderthals

The Third and Final Book in “The Wedding Feast” Series

By Jonathan Pidduck

Copyright 2013 – Jonathan Pidduck

The sky was bruised purple and funeral-grey, back-lit by the last dying embers of the decaying sun. It weighed heavily on the winter wood below, suffocating the last stubborn pockets of light wherever it found them, pouring cold shadow into the leafless void.

All was silent at first, but then tyres crunched down noisily on narrow tarmac. Two intrusive beams of light were doused suddenly; twin metal doors slammed in rapid succession; a pair of shadowy figures penetrated the watching wood.

A man made his way through the trees, a camera in one hand, a hesitant woman towed along in the other.

“It’s dark,” she said.

“That’s what happens at night,” he told her, and led her further into the shadows, keen to start their game.

She swore as something unseen raked her bare leg, but he pulled her ever onwards, forging a path through the creeping undergrowth.

“It’s *really* dark,” she elaborated. “You should’ve brought a torch or something. Can’t we just do it in the car?”

“I wanna take photos first.”

“You’re not gonna see anything. The sun’ll set in a few minutes. It’s blacker than a witch’s minge out here, and twice as bloody creepy.”

“That’s what the flash is for.”

She dug in her stilettos, and came to a resolute stop. “I’m not going any further, Gary. We do it here, or I’m out of here. Your choice.”

He sighed. He gave her arm an exploratory tug, but she refused to budge. “Just a little further,” he urged. “We’re too close to the road. Someone might see.”

“Keys,” she demanded, handing out her hand. She very much doubted anyone would see anything at all once the sun had set.

He huffed, but she stood her ground. The sun gave up the fight, and disappeared below the horizon. She huffed back at him, refusing to be outdone in the petulance stakes.

This was not how he had imagined their photo session would be. It was supposed to be her draped seductively around tree trunks, all pouting and naked and gorgeous, like some nymphomaniac druid. It wasn’t supposed to be the two of them having a “domestic” whilst ankle-deep in squelchy mud. He would never admit it to her, but he hadn’t realised quite how dark it would be out here in the back of beyond. Maybe she was right about not straying too far from the car. She’d kill him if they got lost, or got murdered in the woods.

“Okay, we’ll do it your way. Get your kit off, then.”

“I’m gonna freeze my tits off.”

“That’s not really the look I’m after. Come on, Debbie. Five minutes. Then back home for a curry to warm you up.”

She took her coat off, not without misgivings. She was naked underneath. She shivered with cold, as she looked around for somewhere to put it. She heard him tutting, but ignored him. She was buggered if she was going to get it all muddy, not when it had cost her sixty quid in the Debenhams sales. Besides, he'd probably complain about his upholstery when she got back in the car, just to add insult to injury!

“Ready?” he asked, with more than a hint of impatience.

She draped her coat over a low branch, and took her position by the tree, her thigh pressed seductively against the rough bark of the trunk.

“Shoot.”

“Where are you? I can't see a thing.”

“Over here. By the tree.”

“That's helpful, in a forest!”

She snatched up her coat. “Right, that's it. If you're gonna be sarky, I'm going home.”

“I'm sorry. Okay? It's just that I'm cold, and I'm -”

“*You're* cold?” she snapped. “You've still got your bloody coat on! I'm the one standing here with my tits out – and pretty much everything else besides – while you keep taking the piss out of me every chance you get. Well, if you don't like it, find yourself another model. I'm off.”

He homed in on her voice, and gave her an almost-apologetic hug. He coaxed her coat from her frozen fingers, and placed it back on the branch of the tree. “Five

minutes,” he said. “And I won’t say another word. I promise.”

“You’d better not, or you’re gonna get a swift kick in the knackers.”

She took her position again. She pressed against the tree-trunk, feeling it against her right hip, her thigh, her breast. She could just about make out his silhouette, raising the camera, pointing it towards her.

“You’re too far away,” she told him. “The flash won’t work.”

“I’m the photographer,” he grumbled, but moved a few feet closer to her nonetheless.

“I need to pee.” She sensed him tensing up. “Just winding you up. Go on, take your photo. Your five minutes is nearly up.”

The flash went off, illuminating her for a second. He had to run his thumb around the edge of the camera to find the button to check out the photograph he had just taken, as it was too dark to see it. It was not a good picture; he was still too far away for the flash to work, and it was pretty hard to tell from the photo what was tree and what was naked (but stroppy) woman. He would have liked to have taken the picture again, but there were other angles he wanted to capture, and the way she was moaning about the cold he might run out of time if he tried to be a perfectionist. Best just move on to the next photo, and hope for the best when he Photo-shopped it (or whatever

you call it when you bugger around with the colour and the contrast on the computer).

“Turn round,” he instructed, shuffling a few steps forward to put her in effective range of the flash.

“Do what?” she enquired, mystified.

“I wanna get one of your bottom.”

“Yeah, I bet you do. Go on, then, I’m there. One more picture after this one.”

“Two.”

“One. Did the flash turn out okay?”

“Perfect,” he lied. “Okay, stop talking. I want you looking sultry. It’ll spoil it if your gob’s open.”

“Charming!”

The flash went off a second time. Again, he inspected the photograph he had taken. As promised, she had turned her back to him, and was looking back at him over her shoulder. Her bottom was very much on display. It would have been a good picture, but for the fact that he was now too close with the flash, and her whole body was bathed in spectral white.

“Happy?” she asked.

“Your mouth’s open,” he lied. “You were talking. I’ll have to take it again.”

“Tough. You’ve got one more photo.”

“Debbie! That’s not fair!”

“No, what’s not fair is that I’m standing in the middle of a pitch-black wood, stark-bloody naked, shaking with cold,

while you play at being David Bailey on Viagra! Where do you want me? Last photo.”

“Couldn’t I just take another couple after - ”

“Where’s my coat?”

“Okay, okay, keep your knickers on.”

“Chance would be a fine thing.”

He pretended to think for a few moments, partly because he didn’t want to make it too obvious that he had pre-meditated the last pose, and partly to make her shiver for just a little while longer in retaliation for turning what should have been a real turn-on into a domestic row.

“Can you pole-dance against the tree?”

“Do what? Define pole-dance.”

“Hang on to the trunk with both your legs off the ground. Upside down if you can.”

“Upside-down!”

“Well, the right way up, if you can’t manage that. With your head thrown back, but looking at me all the time. All sexy-like.”

“How can I look at you when I can’t even see you?”

“I’m over here.”

“That doesn’t help.” There was a scrabbling noise as she tried to jump up against the trunk and clasp it between her thighs. “Ow! That hurts. You so owe me for this! I’m gonna want Peshwari naan and Bombay potatoes with my curry, for a start. This is impossible.”

“Can’t you sort of shinny up it, like you’re climbing a rope, and then lean backwards when you get there?”



“You’re gonna get a slap in a minute!”

He waited impatiently. After a couple of minutes of scraping, swearing and exaggerated huffing, she was there.

“I can hold this pose for about five seconds, max.”

“Stop calling me Max.”

“Funny.”

“Are you smiling?”

“Fuck off.”

The flash went off. She dropped back down to the ground, and groped around for her coat as he checked the photograph. She saw his face illuminated by the light from the camera as he inspected his handiwork. He looked really startled; the picture must have been pretty bad for him to look like that! And then he stuffed the camera in her hands and was gone, crashing from tree to tree in the darkness, like a panicky human pinball. Surely she couldn’t have taken that bad a photo?

She pressed a couple of buttons on the camera, trying to find the one which would reveal his awful picture. “Programme”? No, better come out of that. “Set picture size”. No, not that one either. And then she had the photo in front of her on the screen, and she was screaming for all she was worth. And maybe a couple of dozen yards away, Gary was screaming, too, and howling and weeping and begging for his sorry life.

The picture was a bad one. He had cut off her head, so that you could only see her from the neck down, but maybe that was deliberate (as it wasn’t really her face he

had wanted to see). Too much flash, so her flesh was luminous-moon-white. And far from being erotic, her attempts at vertically straddling a tree-trunk were bordering on the ridiculous. She looked more like a plucked koala than the wood-nymph pole-dancer he had wanted her to be.

These were her very first impressions, taken in automatically, with the practised eye of a keen amateur photographer. But what really, really disturbed her was the figure in the background, stalking towards the camera, just within the compass of the flash.

Man or woman, it was hard to tell. It was big, whatever it was, with a lumpy bulbous head and shaggy hair. It was just a few feet behind her, and to her right in the photo, heading straight towards Gary as he snapped away obliviously. It could have reached out and grabbed her, ripped her from her precarious perch on the tree, but it seemed intent on accosting her boyfriend instead.

Gary was still screaming. It had hold of him, somewhere close by in the wood, and assuming that he had run in the right direction then the two of them were now blocking her escape-route back to the car.

She tried to fight back the panic. The more noise she made, the more likely that the creature – it hardly looked human enough to be called anything else – would track her down. What to do? Go to Gary's rescue? Hide amongst the trees, and hope that she survived until daylight? Or make a

circuitous break for the car, in the hope that she could find it and seek sanctuary inside?

Gary stopped screeching. She was relieved for just a second, but then the full implications of this hit her. There was only one reason for him to have gone quiet. He must be dead.

Pulling her unbuttoned coat tightly closed with one hand (it made her feel slightly less vulnerable somehow), she scurried forwards, waving her free hand in front of her like a blind-man's white-stick. Every time she encountered a tree, she felt her way round it, and then ran on again, heading for where she hoped the car would be.

She heard something moving to her left. The creature must have finished with Gary, and was trying to intercept her. She quickened her pace, bouncing painfully off a tree-trunk (she prayed it was just a tree-trunk) and hurrying on.

And then there was the sound of her stilettos on tarmac. She had found the road. The car was close by. Which way, left or right? She picked a direction at random. No trees now. She ran along the road at full pelt, wincing at how much noise her shoes was making. She ignored the urge to stop to take them off. No time. She could sense the creature nearby, closing in on her, ready to tear her limb from limb. Whether she lived or died depended entirely on whether she made it to the car before it set upon her.

And then she was there. Cold metal beneath her fingers. That must be the bonnet, on the driver's side. She skirted the car, cursing herself halfway round for panicking and

heading for the passenger's side when she could have dived through the driver's door instead. Old habits died hard. She prayed out loud that she wouldn't die with them.

She reached the passenger door. Convinced that the creature would seize her and pull her back into the wood at any second, she tugged at the handle. The door stayed resolutely shut. She pulled again for all she was worth, but all to no avail. The stupid bastard had locked it!

She screamed in frustration, again and again. And then she felt a big meaty paw on her arm, pulling her away from the car, back into the trees. She screamed louder, and shriller, and when that didn't work she swore for all she was worth.

"Please don't swear." A gruff, female voice, full of reproach. "Daddy hated swearing."

And then there was nothing but blackness.

#

She woke to the sound of slurping and gnawing. It was still too dark to see anything at all. She was lying on the grass, she could feel it beneath her; the creature must have pulled her back into the trees after she had fainted. Her coat had ridden up round her waist as she had been dragged through the undergrowth, and she pulled it down to cover up as much of herself as possible, buttoning it tightly against the cold and the horror of her situation.

“Good night,” said the creature. It giggled. “That sounds wrong. It makes it sound like you’re going to bed. But it’s too early to say good morning.”

She didn’t answer. She felt nauseous. She huddled in her coat, and prayed that the creature would spare her from further conversation.

“My name’s Matilda,” it said. “What’s yours?”

“Beth,” Debbie lied. She didn’t want this “woman” to know her real name. Knowledge is power, and she had more than enough power already.

More slurping.

“What are you eating?” she asked sharply. “Where’s Gary?”

“I’m sorry,” Matilda replied. “I’ve been living out here for a long time now. I’m rubbish at catching rabbits. I was starving, and I saw the two of you, and – a girl’s got to eat. Do you want some? I’ve saved you an arm, just in case.”

Debbie vomited on the grass.

“No,” said Matilda. “I thought not. But it would have been rude not to offer.”

“Are you going to kill me, too?”

Silence. She half-wished she could see Matilda’s face, to see whether there were any signs of compassion or doubt. But the other half was glad that she could not. Presumably, she had part of Gary’s body stuck in her mouth, chomping away on it as if it was a giant turkey-leg. Some things were better left unseen.

She changed tack. “Are you on the run? From the Police?”

“Sort of. They’ve eaten Crow, but someone else will be after me now. There’s always someone after me.”

“Eaten Crow?”

“And Father. And a fat boy. I’m not sure who he was. He cried a lot.”

“I don’t understand.”

“I’m not sure I do either. Are you sure you don’t want some meat? It’ll make you feel better. It tastes a lot like chicken.”

Debbie vomited copiously, which Matilda must have taken as a “no”, as she did not offer again.

#

Dr Read was uncomfortable. Partly because he had huge reservations about discharging his favourite patient from the psychiatric hospital, but also because he had bolted down his dinner and now had a nasty case of acid indigestion.

Georgia Richardson sat opposite him. His colleagues were unanimously of the opinion that she was no longer a threat to society, however much he had argued against this. He had arranged this one final session with her, on the pretext of it being a debriefing/appraisal (he suspected that there were quite a few of his colleagues who would be only too happy to debrief her if professional ethics had

permitted it, which infuriated him as he wanted to have exclusive rights in this respect). But his real motive for this consultation, though, was to see if he could obtain anything from her which might enable him to cancel her discharge, and keep her here with him for as long as he possibly could.

He looked at her file on the laptop on the desk in front of him, still trying to compose himself. This was such an important meeting. He had to get it right, or she would be gone, and he would lose her forever.

“You’re all ready for tomorrow?” he asked. “No last minute qualms about facing the great big outside world after all this time safe and sound in here?”

She nodded, a confident smile but with the tiniest hint of wariness in her eyes. He loved that grin of hers, even when it was suspicious at the corners. Young ladies (she was in her early thirties, but he was twice that, so she was still young to him) often had silly, inconsequential smiles, he always thought, but not hers. With a tight twist of jealousy which momentarily swamped his indigestion, he speculated that his colleagues may have only certified her fit for release because she had shared her smile with them. But they were idiots; they should have realised that if they liked her that much, it was better to keep her here, where she could flash those perfect white teeth at them all day long.

“You’re happy being in accommodation all on your own? You wouldn’t prefer to be here, where we can look after you?”

She shook her head, he assumed in response to his second question. She did not appear to be in the mood to talk. She knew that all she had to do was keep quiet, and she’d been free in the morning. Talking was dangerous. Talking would risk everything, especially with him sitting here ready to take notes. She had been here for ten years (the last three of which were under his watchful eye) and she had had enough. She wanted to go home.

He scrolled through her admission notes on his laptop.

“What happened to Michael Crow?”

She shrugged. This was starting to get a little irritating. Didn’t she know that he was trying to keep her here for her own good?

“According to your file, you were an animal rights activist. You turned up at the house of one Maurice Bailey, accusing him of kidnapping a friend of yours, and making serious threats against him and his elderly wife. He called the Police, and you were escorted off the premises by Officer Crow. You were later found handcuffed in Crow’s car in Ramsgate, screaming your head off. When asked about his whereabouts, you claimed that he had gone to capture trolls in a deserted terraced house nearby. Does any of this ring any bells with you?”

“I was confused. It was all nonsense.”



“You went on to say that you and two friends of yours had earlier liberated a troll from a research facility in Maidstone, left her in a caravan, and that you had last seen her running out of the deserted house into which Officer Crow had disappeared. When that house was later searched, there was no sign of Crow or anyone else, save that there was blood all over the place. Which was found to belong to Crow, his son, and one other as yet unidentified person.”

She shuddered.

“You knew the son, didn’t you?”

“You know I did.”

“Dexter.”

“Dexter.”

“The Police speculated that you had lured Crow there, possibly with the promise of sex.”

“You’re enjoying this, aren’t you?”

“And then you killed him, possibly with the aid of accomplices. You handcuffed yourself up in his car. And you would have gone to prison for life, but for the court taking the view that you were criminally insane, with all this talk of trolls.”

“I know better now.”

“In what way?”

“I was clearly deluded. I’ve had ten years of treatment. I’m better now. I’m ready to go home.”

He studied her, trying unsuccessfully to make her squirm under his gaze. He liked making people uncomfortable, it

was one of the perks of his job. She stared back at him, cool as crushed ice, not giving him an inch. She was one tough nut to crack, which was pretty much why he felt this way about her.

“You’re not just saying that, Georgie? Trying to lie your way out of here?”

“As if.”

“You can tell me. It won’t go in your records. Just between the two of us. Were there any trolls that night?”

“There’s no such thing as trolls.”

“Trust me. I believe in them, too.”

“Then maybe you should have my room when I book out tomorrow.”

This was clearly not working. She was never going to say anything he could use against her, not if they continued with this conversation until Christmas. He would have to move on to Plan B. He didn’t want to; she would hate him for it, and that wasn’t what he wanted at all, but the alternative was for her to walk out of here tomorrow and he would never see her again.

“You’re convinced you’re better, then? Full recovery.”

She nodded. “One hundred per cent.”

He typed out a long entry in her records. She tried to crane her neck to see what he was typing, but he moved the laptop round a little to obscure her view. It was for her own good. It would only distress her if she could read the entry he had just made.

“Then you’re free to leave.”

“I know. First thing tomorrow morning, right?”

“You’re free to leave now.”

She stared at him. He stared back, as innocently as he could manage. His indigestion cranked up a notch. He assumed that it was because he was becoming a little agitated by this game they were playing. He tried to discount the notion that it was Karma, dishing out a little mild torture to punish him for his duplicity. He believed in Karma. God knows what would end up happening to him one day to pay him back for this.

“But it’s supposed to be tomorrow. I’ve got no transport tonight. No accommodation. I’ve not packed my stuff up.”

“All arranged. Your bags have been packed for you while you’ve been out of your room. There’s a taxi waiting for you outside, and a nice cosy bed for you just ten minutes drive away, with your name on it.”

He blushed at the word “bed”, hoping it wouldn’t be too obvious what was going through his mind when he said it. She looked wary. He felt hurt that she didn’t trust him. So maybe she was right to be suspicious of him this time round, but she wasn’t to know that, was she?

“I can walk out of here? Right this second?”

“Unless you’d rather stay here with us? I’ve just discharged you, but I can always delete the entry if you’d be happier here with me. With us. Where it’s safe.”

She stood up. “Let’s go.”

He tried to stifle a smirk. Plan B was going better than he expected. He led her out the room, and down a succession

of long white-walled corridors with shiny wooden floors. They had to stop twice for him to key in entry codes. Everything was going to plan.

“This isn’t the way out.”

“The taxi’s out back,” he lied. “It’s quicker this way.” Less chance of bumping into other members of staff too, he thought. I can’t just march you past reception. I can’t march you past anyone without getting in an awful lot of trouble, and if they sack me then there’s really not been much point doing all of this to make you stay.

They reached a door. Another access code, and it was open. It was dark outside. She stood on the threshold, looking out. He had a cat, which always sniffed the air before leaving the sanctuary of home, presumably to see whether there were any other (bigger) cats in the neighbourhood which might be lying in wait for him outside. He assumed it was the same for her. She had been in here for a decade. She desperately wanted “out”, but he guessed she was a little scared at the same time, however confident she seemed on the outside. Life was pretty hard out there. He was doing her a favour really.

She took a step outwards. She shivered.

“I need my coat.”

“It’s in the taxi.”

“What taxi?”

“It’s just round the corner.”

She looked deep into his eyes. He looked away after a few seconds. It was easier to lie that way.

“What’s going on?”

“Nothing.”

“Maybe I should wait until morning.”

She made as if to step back inside. He blocked her path.

“You’ll have to get your stuff from the taxi first.”

“You do it for me.”

“You’re discharged now. It’s not up to me. Either you leave tonight, or you go and collect your stuff and sit on the doorstep until morning. It makes no difference to me.”

She tried to shuffle him to one side. “I want to go back inside.”

“Are you assaulting me? Maybe you’re not ready for this yet.”

She attempted to dodge round him, but he seized her arm and pulled her back. She flared up, and for a second he thought she was going to strike him, but she thought better of it. If she used violence, then she would be back in the mental hospital for years to come. He filed that away for future use, just in case she was ever to be discharged again.

He put a reassuring hand on her shoulder. She shrugged it off angrily. She didn’t even want him to touch her, even though he was discharging her early (well, maybe not, but she wasn’t to know that). He pushed her away (back towards her imaginary taxi), stepped back inside, and slammed the door behind him before she could follow him in.

He hurried off down the corridor. She banged on the door for a while (how ironic that she was trying to get back in

after all this time!) but had given up by the time he had passed the store-room. He knew what she would do now. She would be on her way to reception, to tell them that he had forcibly thrown her out the back door. He had to be quick.

The hospital had an alarm, an old air-raid type alarm which they had introduced at the insistence of the local village after two separate escape attempts by dangerous residents (one successful, one not). And here it was. He punched his fist against it, smiling with satisfaction at the wailing noise which reverberated both inside and outside the building.

They would be out looking for her in seconds. She'd be safely back in her room well before bed-time. And with a little luck, she would require more psycho-analysis than ever before.

Even allowing for his indigestion, this was going to be the best day since he had first met her. Life was good. Life was Georgia.

#

Matilda's new companion was not very talkative. She just sat slumped on the grass, sobbing from time to time. She must have been poorly, as every time Matilda took a bite out of the young man she had caught for her supper, the girl clutched her ears and started shaking violently. Earache could be a terrible thing.

She felt sorry for her new friend, and would have comforted her if she could. But she knew from bitter experience that people got upset when she put an arm around their shoulders, and they tended to scream a lot. She didn't like that. It made her cry.

She had not had the best of lives herself. For the first twenty years or so, she had been at the House with her family. Pitch dark, cold as scorn, and she was never, ever allowed to go out to see the Outside. She had been beaten regularly by her brutish father, and if it wasn't for Mummy, her brother Vincent and (in the early years) Nanny, she would have been very miserable indeed. But they kept her going, and she kept them going, and somehow it had all been bearable between them.

Nanny was born Outside, but had come to the House many years before, because she loved Granddaddy and wanted to be with him. When the menfolk were out foraging, Nanny would tell her stories of what it was like out there. Outsiders could come and go as they pleased, there was light (she had not really understood the concept of this at the time, but it sounded like it was a good thing from the longing way Nanny described it) and no-one was allowed to bite anyone or break their bones (no matter what they had done). Matilda had never quite understood why Nanny had given up all of these wonderful things to stay in the darkness in the House; she must have loved Granddaddy very much. And Matilda wanted to love someone, too. Not one of her own – not Family – but an

Outsider, who could tell her stories, and be as kind and gentle with her as Nanny had been.

And she had found such a man on her wedding day. Daddy had foraged him, and he was to have been her Wedding Feast. It was traditional for Family to have one every time they married. That way, everyone could eat the Outsider during the service, rather than getting all cross and agitated and taking chunks out of each other (or mating with the bride, as sometimes happened in the frenzy of it all).

But she had saved Philip. She had told him that she would rescue him if he married her. He hadn't seemed too keen at first. He looked as if he was going to throw up when he first saw her, and for a moment she thought he was going to choose to be eaten alive rather than doing her the honour of becoming her husband. Once she had assured him that she had no intention of riding him "like a little piggy", though, he had been a lot more relaxed about the idea. Where he had got such a strange idea from, was beyond her. She had loved him very much indeed, but he had had some very strange notions, it must be said.

Theirs had not been an uneventful engagement. Her Family had come after them, and Agent Crow had come after them, and even Philip's previous Beloved had got a bit cross. But Philip was dead now, and so were all the others. And she could never go back to her own kind, as she had sold out her Family to try to save the man she loved, and they were not very happy about that at all. She



was an outcast, and would remain so for the rest of her sad and guilty life.

So she had been out here for the last however many years, hiding from Outsiders, hiding from extended-Family, hiding from everyone. It was a lonely existence, and it was hard to catch enough food to keep herself alive. She had tried to live off woodland creatures when she had first come here, but the little rascals were far too quick for her. Then she had ventured into the nearest town after dark to raid dustbins, but Daddy had never taught her how to forage (she was a girl, and girls never left the House) and she had nearly been spotted on two or three occasions. If they had found her, she would have been put back in the cage, where they would torture her and cut her open and tease her with poor dead Mummy's corpse. So she had resolved to stay here in the woods, eating whoever was silly enough to venture into the trees after dark (topped up with the occasional road-kill badger). If they were stupid enough to wander around out here after dark, then they kind of deserved it really.

She didn't want to eat these poor people, of course. She had always hated it when her Family had tucked into Wedding Feasts, tearing them limb from limb, sucking on the bones they had wrenched free from their often still-living meal. Mummy had said that Wedding Feasts weren't like us, and didn't feel pain; they just screamed and twitched through reflex. But Matilda wasn't so sure. That terrified look in their eyes was just too much to bear. And

once she had met and fallen in love with her Philip, then the idea of eating them was almost too much to stomach. Almost, but not quite. The alternative was a lifetime chasing tricky little foxes, or a very much shorter lifetime in a tiny cage, being tormented by hurtful Outsiders who wanted her dead. No, however distasteful it was, she would have to eat anyone she could get her hands on.

Her companion started weeping again, out of the blue, for no apparent reason. Outsiders were funny like that. It had been a good hour since she had eaten this woman's Beloved, yet every time she thought the tears had dried up they started all over again. It was true that she herself had never forgotten Philip, and it still made her very sad thinking about him when she was all on her own out here, but that was different. Philip had been much better than the man she was munching on. He would not have made her take her clothes off in the woods and straddle a tree, like this poor girl had done. Indeed, Philip had always been very keen indeed to ensure that she did not take off any of her clothes at all.

She heard a twig snap, somewhere not far off. She was on her feet in an instant, straining to listen, to work out what was out there and whether it was big enough or likely enough to do her harm. She could hear nothing, though, as her new friend started screaming like a Wedding Feast! She had heard Matilda jump to her feet, and was now convinced that she was next on the menu.

“Stop screaming,” Matilda pleaded. “I’m not going to eat you.” She hesitated for a second, torn between the desire to reassure this woman into silence and the lessons which had almost literally been drummed into her as a child to never, ever tell lies. “Well, I am, but not yet.”

The silly thing screamed all the more. Matilda was losing valuable time. Whatever was lurking out there in the trees could fall on her in seconds. She couldn’t hear them, but they could hear all the hysterical screeching so pretty much knew where she was. What if it was Crow? Well, maybe not Crow because he must be dead, but one of his men. Come to take her back to that cage. Last time, they had put Mummy’s corpse outside the cage, just beyond her reach, to make her cry. She couldn’t bear that again. Besides, after all these years, Mummy would not smell very nice at all.

Matilda took action. She had to shut the screaming up. The safest thing to do would be to break the woman’s neck, but in her panic she opted for grabbing her and sticking her in the lower branches of a tree, like leopard-kill. At least that way she could go back for her later, and she would still be fresh. She hated to see good food go to waste.

She went to dash off into the woods, but changed her mind. Maybe it was just a fox out there? It would eat her half-chomped man if she left him on the ground. She collected his corpse, and jammed him between the tree trunk and the woman she had stuffed up the tree already.

For some reason, the silly girl screamed all the more. You would have thought she would be grateful to be reunited with her Beloved one last time, even if he was a little chewed around the edges. Outsiders were never happy.

Now was the time for escape. But which way to run? She listened, but it was hopeless; the hysterical girl was still yelling for all she was worth! She sniffed, but all she could smell was her supper (who was fast getting cold!) She had no real idea who or what she was running from, or where she should run to. So she picked a direction at random and galloped off.

Within seconds, something had grabbed her round her broad waist, and wrestled her face-first to the ground. Something powerful; there was no Outsider in the world strong enough to take down a big girl like her. She struggled, but to no avail. She was well and truly caught.

“Matilda, I presume?” A deep, gruff voice, but not unkind. Voices could be deceptive, though. People who wrestled women to the ground tended not to have their best interests at heart.

She craned her short stubby neck to see who had done this to her. She cringed. This was bad. This was very, very bad. This was one of her own kind. And last time they had caught her, a whole bunch of them had tried to eat her. Which was no way to treat Family, as far as she was concerned.

#

Georgia was not a happy bunny.

She had always thought that there was something dodgy about that Dr Read. The creepy way he looked at her over the top of his half-moon glasses during psycho-analysis; the winks he gave her when he threw the occasional highly inappropriate double-entendre into their conversations, as if he expected her to get all excited and ravage him on the highly polished floor. He was a dirty old man with a crush on a woman half his age. But despite his unethical behaviour, she would never have thought him capable of this! Shoving her out the back door of the asylum, and then setting off the alarms so she would get captured again (and spend God knows how long doing time for her so-called escape), was taking it a bit too far, even for someone as strange and as seedy as him.

She was on the way round to reception when the alarms sounded. Maybe she should just carry on? She could walk in there, and tell them that one of their senior doctors had just bundled her out the back, and then activated the alarms so she would be taken back in again. But who would believe her? It sounded deranged, even to her. And technically she was still a mental patient until tomorrow. The chances of them taking her word over his seemed about as slim as an anorexic on a hunger strike.

She looked around for somewhere to hide. There were two trees and some threadbare winter bushes. Her three year old niece (no, thirteen year old niece by now!) would

have been able to find her if she hid here. There was no option but to run.

She took off along the path, running alongside the large brick-built building in which she had been imprisoned for a decade. She expected to see staff members waiting for her at the front, ready to catch her and bundle her unceremoniously into a straight-jacket and a padded cell (or whatever it was they did with recaptured escapees here), but there was no-one. They probably wanted to finish off their dinners before coming to look for her, the greedy buggers!

And then she was on the main driveway, leading to the outside world, a world she had not seen for a very long time indeed. That was probably the most frightening part of all this. She was quite enjoying the escape itself – after all those years of boredom, it was nice to have adrenalin coursing through her veins again – but she had got used to living within four walls. She had forgotten how big it was out there.

She reached the road. She turned round to see whether they were after her yet. One man ran out of reception, looked around, spotted her. He shouted at her, demanding that she come back in. Yeah, like that was going to happen! He didn't seem in any great hurry to chase her though, until he had reinforcements. Chicken!

Another couple of men spilled out of the building, and the three of them set off up the driveway in pursuit. It was a long driveway. She had maybe forty five seconds head-

start at best (it would have been less, but none of them were particularly lively). She had to get out of here fast.

A car passed by along the road outside. She tried to flag it down, but it kept going. It was going to be hard to find someone to pick up a hitchhiker after dark, especially one who was running along like a maniac outside a mental institution (which was pretty much what she was).

She turned right, running towards the traffic on her side of the road (rather than away from it) to give her an extra second or two to find a lift. Another car. She stepped into the road in front of it, waving her arms in the air in a desperate attempt to convince the driver to stop, but all to no avail. The bastard honked her, steered round her, and disappeared off home to watch the News (in which she would no doubt feature prominently), or whatever else it was that bastards watch on the telly nowadays.

They were gaining on her, but only slowly. She was thirty, whereas they had a combined age of about a hundred and fifty. If she hadn't kept stopping to frighten passing drivers, she could have left them quite some distance behind by now. But she had no choice. The Police would be on their way. Maybe other members of staff were piling into cars even now. She had to find transport, and she had to find it now.

Another car, a hundred yards distant and approaching fast. How to make it stop? There was only one way she could think of which would give her at least a 50% chance of success. She didn't like doing it, but needs must. It was

either this, or back at the funny farm getting touched up by Dr Read whilst she was trussed up in a straight-jacket. Anything had to be better than that.

She pulled up her top, flashing her bra at the oncoming car, praying that it was a man (but not a psycho, though recent experiences were making it harder and harder to distinguish between the two). She didn't have all that much raw material to fill her bra, but what she had was perfectly formed, and had never let her down yet. She smiled as the car came to an emergency stop beside her. She still had it!

She jumped in. To her surprise, the driver was a woman. She smiled at Georgia. Georgia obligingly smiled back.

"I'm heading for Kent," the woman said.

"That's great. Could you drive off quickly? Those men are chasing me."

"Perverts?"

"Aren't they all?"

The lady stamped on the accelerator, and they were off, nearly mowing down two of the chasing hospital staff/perverts as she did so.

"Did you flash them, too?" the woman asked, sounding just a touch jealous, as if she had already laid claim to Georgia's breasts for herself.

"Yes," Georgia replied, still trying to get her breath back.

"They're animals," the woman snorted. "It's a good job I was passing. God knows what might have happened otherwise. Just because a woman chooses to show her



bosoms to a man, it doesn't give him the right to chase her down the road after dark. Or at any other time, come to that."

Georgia nodded in agreement. She had escaped, at least for the time being. But that was going to be the easy bit. Now, she had to go back to the house where the trolls lived, to see if there was any sign of Dexter or Agent Crow. Or, indeed, any sign of Them.

#

The walls were entirely covered in sea-shells, millions of them (Matilda was not entirely sure what a million was, but Nanny had said it whenever there was a lot of something, and there were an awful lot of them indeed).

Her captor's name was Alexander, and he had explained to her that she was not in actual fact a captive at all. He had plucked Debbie out of the tree, shaken her until she went quiet (and possibly dead, it was hard to tell in the dark), and told her that she was invited to accompany him to the Shell Palace to meet KING.

She had only ever heard KING mentioned once before. She was a girl, and had no need to know about such things, but she had once been in the room when Nanny had contradicted Daddy on the subject. Nanny said he should say "The King", but Daddy made it clear that just because Nanny and other Outsiders said "the King", it didn't mean that Family had to say that, too. KING was, and always

would be, KING, and nothing else. It was a name, not a title. Outsiders had copied the name from Family tens of thousands of years ago (she wasn't sure what thousands were, either, but presumably it was another name for millions), just as they had copied weddings and clothes and spears and body-art. Nanny said that all of those things were human inventions, but Daddy persuaded her otherwise with such eloquence that she couldn't use her right arm for six weeks.

They had travelled here through the darkness, bringing the dead or unconscious Debbie with them (presumably so KING could eat her). Family had always been very good at making their way through towns in the early hours of the morning without being spotted. She was less practised at this herself, as she had never been allowed out until she ran away with Philip, but Alexander was savvy enough for both of them and they made it to the Shell Palace without incident.

Given a choice, she would have preferred not to come. She had told Agent Crow where to find her Family, and he had wiped them all out. And then he had killed Mummy and Vincent, her brother, notwithstanding his promise to spare them. The whole House dead, and all because of her. She had done it to save Philip, but Philip was an Outsider, so she didn't think this would carry much weight with KING or any of her kind. And KING was bound to know all about it. If the Margate Family knew, everyone would know, because they had never been very good at keeping

anything secret, especially Kaye (the little minx). But Alexander was a male, a lot bigger than her, and was used to foraging. If she had declined to go with him, he would no doubt have shaken her until she was dead or unconscious, and then he could have brought her here anyway. She didn't like being shaken. Daddy used to do it to her a lot, and it made her head hurt badly.

The Palace was something of a disappointment. Nanny used to tell her stories about palaces, big and shiny and full of colour. She hadn't understood what colour was at the time, as she had lived her whole life in darkness, but she knew now, and it sounded rather wonderful. And wise kings lived there, and beautiful princesses, and horses that were there for riding rather than eating. This Palace, however, was squeezed into the middle of a row of grey terraced houses in Margate.

The front door was unlocked. They went through one room which had a lady made of shells in one corner, another with pictures on the walls, and then a flight of steps took them down to a passageway. The ceiling of the passage was high and arched, and every inch of the walls was covered with sea-shells, all arranged in patterns. She walked along the passage in amazement. She had never seen anything like this before in all of her relatively short life (which might well soon be coming to a violent and premature end).

Alexander turned round to check she was still behind him. Debbie was slung across his shoulder, and her legs

swirled round, striking Matilda gently on the shoulder. She yelped, more in surprise than discomfort. He gave her a wink and a chuckle.

“Are you ready?”

“Ready for what?” she asked nervously. She hoped that it wasn’t anything to do with mating, as she didn’t like that sort of thing.

“Ready for your audience with KING?”

She tried to look past him, but he pretty much filled the passageway. All she could see were the shells which framed his head and body.

He took her silence as assent. “I’ve got to go back in a second, to store this Outsider with the others. Just follow the passageway through to the altar, okay?”

“You’re not coming with me?”

“He wants to see you alone.”

Matilda had a sudden urge to turn and run. How could she have been so stupid to come here? Family hated her for what she had done to her own. And she had walked straight into their nest without so much as a contingency plan. No weapon, no escape route, no nothing (Philip would have said that was a double negative and laughed at her, but he was her Beloved so she would have forgiven him for it if he had been here).

“Matilda?”

“Follow the passageway. Yes. I can do that.”

The passageway fed into a small domed chamber. There was an opening at the top leading out into the big wide

world, far too high for her to escape through, though. The sun was starting to rise outside, and milky daylight trickled in from above. There were two other passages leading off from the chamber. Alexander took the one to their right, signalling for her to carry on to the left. She hesitated. He stopped, and returned to her side.

“He’s just down there. In the Altar Chamber.”

“I’m frightened.”

He smiled at her. “You’ve got a lot to be frightened about. But not from KING.”

She nodded, but remained unconvinced.

“Go on. You shouldn’t keep him waiting.”

He left her. She wanted to call him back. He wasn’t her friend, he was just someone who had been sent to fetch her here, but he was all she had. She didn’t want to see KING alone. He knew she had betrayed her whole Family for the sake of an Outsider, and by the sound of it he was more powerful even than Daddy, if such a thing was possible. Daddy would have ripped her into soggy pieces if he had still been alive. All she could pray for was a quick and merciful death.

Trembling with fear, she set off along the curved passageway towards the Altar Chamber and KING’s terrible retribution for her sins.

#

It was mid-morning by the time Georgia arrived at the House. The lady had dropped her off in Canterbury, with a parting lecture about how she should never, ever flash her breasts at men because you never knew what they might do, and with an invite to phone her if ever she fancied a “girls’ night out”, just the two of them. She had hitched to Ramsgate, without having to flash anything at anyone, and made her way to the House where the trolls had seized Dexter all those years ago.

Dexter had been one of her two co-conspirators in their plan to free Matilda from the experimentation laboratory where she was being held by Agent Crow. He was tubby and anxious, but would do absolutely anything for her. They had known each other since childhood. And now he was almost certainly dead.

The other member of the team had been Keith. He could best be described as a bit of a git. He constantly bullied poor old Dex, and lusted after her, and had probably only agreed to help out because he thought he’d get a shag when it was all done. Keith was also missing. And when she had finished looking for Dex, she’d go in search of him, too.

She had feared that the house might be occupied after all the time she had spent at the psychiatric hospital, but it was as derelict as ever. Even in broad daylight, it looked dark and diseased, a black and abscessed molar in a row of healthy terraced teeth. She could see why no-one would have wanted to rent it, looking like that.

She stood outside for a minute, reluctant to go in, frightened of what she might find inside. But she was cold; it was winter, and Read had packed her off without her coat. She was also hungry, and the sooner this was over, the sooner she could go in search of something to eat. Quite how she was going to manage that without money was anyone's guess, but she would manage somehow. She always did.

She broke in through the back door, just as she had last time around. On that previous occasion, the trolls had been waiting for them in the dark, seizing Dexter before he had been able to escape. She had gone for help from Maurice, a seventy year old swinger with an interest in trolls, who had drugged her with God-knows-what in mind. She had been rescued by Crow of all people, who had driven her here, cuffed her to the car, and gone inside in search of Dexter. And she hadn't seen either of them since.

Nothing had changed in the kitchen. The antiquated sink, the 1950's wallpaper, the (now faded) stench of sewage and decay. She drew the curtains for more light. She had always considered herself fearless, but even she was not ready to wander round the House in semi-darkness, not after what had happened here before.

No clues in here. She made her way into the hallway. There were stairs leading to the first floor. She would start down here, and work her way up. For some reason, she felt nervous about going up there, as if she was a burglar and the house-owners were lying in wait for her in their

bedrooms. And not just any house-owners. Seven foot tall creatures, shaped like huge fridges, with a tendency to gnaw people's faces off at the drop of a hat.

With this in mind, she wondered why she had gone to all the trouble of rescuing Matilda from the research centre. The plan had been to set her free in the woods. They had been torturing her at the centre. They had captured other trolls before her, and Dexter had told her that they all ended up being dissected on the operating table, often without the kindness or the expense of anaesthetic. She had wanted to save the poor creature from that, just as she had helped rescue dogs and cats and even a smoking monkey in the past. But she had been naive, she could see that now. Setting free a hulking great troll in the gentle woodlands of East Kent was always bound to end in tears.

The house was bigger than it looked from outside. There were doors on either side of the corridor. She had the weirdest feeling that each would open up to something different, that by choosing a door she would be choosing her fate. She shook the idea from her head. There would be nothing in any of them except badly-sprung sofas and black and white TVs, most like.

She entered the room. No furniture at all. Barer than a lap-dancer with a Brazilian (or was it a Hollywood; her knowledge of ladies' "intimate hairdressing" terms had always been a little sketchy). No sign of life, no sign of death, no sign of anything. Except the smell; it was strong enough here to make her gag. The house had presumably



been empty for years. If it was like that now, what would it have been like then, when Dexter had been taken?

Another room, with the same result. And another one. One more room, and she would have to go upstairs.

This last room was different. It was dark in here, very dark, and the smell was so very much worse. She felt her way to the window to draw the curtains. They felt crusty. She looked around the room. What she saw shocked her, and she was very nearly sick on the floor. Blood everywhere; on the walls, on the floor, even a little on the ceiling. The curtains were covered in it, hence the crustiness. All dried up, but still very recognisable by its colour. It was like an abattoir in here. And what really made her heave was that this was where Dexter had been. He had come here because she had asked him to. And now she literally had his blood on her hands.

#

The Altar Chamber was empty, save for millions (thousands?) of sea-shells on the wall. And, more to the point, there was KING.

He was very large, even for Family. He stood eighteen inches taller than her, and must have weighed nearly half as much as her again. His hands were huge; he could have wrapped them round her head, and crushed it, had he willed it. No crown or robes, like in Nanny's stories. Just a regular member of Family, but very much bigger.

He took a step forward. She took several back, and then stopped nervously at the end of the passageway, too frightened to come back in but not daring to run away. He took another step forwards, and she took two backwards. The distance between them stayed the same. His steps must have been larger than hers, which was hardly fair.

“Shall we dance?” he asked, rather unexpectedly.

She looked at him in confusion. “Why would we dance?”

He walked forward again, she reversed still further, and he laughed out loud. She flushed. She didn’t like it when people made fun of her. Daddy used to make fun of her to Family, and it had made her feel awful.

He turned his back on her and walked back towards the centre of the chamber. “Come on. We have a lot to talk about.”

If she was going to run, now would be the time to do it. But if he had wanted to kill her, she would be dead already. And if she ran, he would catch her and beat her for being rude. She followed him into the chamber, as cautious as one of the nervous little foxes she had spent the last ten years trying to catch.

“How are you?” he asked. Why was he being nice? She nodded warily, conscious that this wasn’t really an answer to his question, but not really knowing what else she could do.

“You want to know why you’re here, no doubt. You’re worried that I’m going to punish you for betraying Family to the Outsiders, to Crow of all people. And there was a

time that I would have killed you for it without a second thought. But that time has passed.”

“It has?”

“It has. Matilda, I’ll be frank with you. We’re losing Family faster than ever before. They have new ways of tracking us down. If you had not given your House up, the chances are that they would be dead by now anyway. There used to be ten thousand of us, spread over many, many miles. Do you know how many of us are left?”

“A million?”

He gave her a wry smile. She hung her head, embarrassed by her ignorance. Maybe a thousand and a million were different after all.

“A few hundred. And our number is dropping fast. They are picking us off, one House at a time, and in another decade or two we will all be gone forever. Family were here long before them, but ever since they first came here they have been exterminating us like diseased rats. We have been in hiding from them for generation after generation, taking them only for Wedding Feasts (or when there is nothing else to eat), but hiding is no longer an option. We must act now, or face extinction.”

“Extinction?”

“That means there would be none of us left. I can’t sit by and see that happen, Matilda. I’m KING, just as my father was before me, and his father before him. I can’t let them wipe us off the face of the Earth, without lifting a finger to stop them.”

“The Earth?”

“It doesn’t matter. The point is that we must act now, whatever the consequences.”

He stopped. He seemed sad and agitated in equal measure. She could tell that he was not entirely comfortable with his plan, whatever it was. She remembered what Alexander had said to her, that she had a lot to be frightened about. How did she fit into all this, and how much pain would she have to go through before she could go back home to her safe and lonely wood?

“So what do you want me to do?”

“I want someone to talk to them, to offer a deal. They leave us alone, and in return we stop taking them as Wedding Feasts. Live and let live.”

“Why me?” she asked, genuinely mystified. With her track record, surely she would be the worst person to choose for this task?

“You took one of them as your husband.”

“We never got married.”

“Living in sin? You’re really not helping yourself here.”

“We were going to get married, but Mummy -”

KING waved her to silence. “It’s not important. The point is that you understand Outsiders better than any of us could ever have the misfortune to do. You’ve spoken to them, you’ve listened to them, you’ve formed emotional attachments to them, while the rest of us have done nothing but eat them. I need you to speak for us, convince

them to leave us in peace, if we leave them be. It's our best hope of survival."

"But what if they won't listen to me?"

He looked her straight in the eye. She held his gaze for a second or two, but then looked away. His expression was just too intense.

"Then we kill them all, every single one of them. Or we all die trying."

#

Georgia tried to wash the blood off her hands in the kitchen-sink, a twenty-first century Lady Macbeth, but there was no water. It was obvious when she thought about it: the chances of trolls paying Southern Water by direct debit seemed pretty remote. That would explain why the heating was off, too.

She was about to leave - she had seen all she needed to see here - when she heard a creak from above. Should she go and investigate? Old houses made noises all the time, so it was probably nothing. But if there was something here, it would probably be something bad, something very bad indeed. Logic told her to run, but hey, she was an escaped mental patient after all. She had every right to ignore Logic if she wanted to.

She made her way to the foot of the stairs, and peered upwards. It was dark up there. Why was she putting herself through this? Why not walk away, or at the very least go

and find something to eat, and come back later when whatever was up there had settled back down? But no, she would have to do this right now for two reasons. One, because if there were trolls here they would see that she had broken in through the back door and would be waiting for her when she came back. And two, because there was still the tiniest of chances that Dexter was still alive, and she had already deserted him once. She couldn't leave here until she had searched every room, and made absolutely certain that he was gone forever.

She crept up the narrow stair-case. There was one of those stupid half-arsed banisters which were just lengths of carved wood, painted white and stuck to the wall, which you can't get your fingers around. She doubted that trolls were too fussed about banisters though, they didn't seem the type to trouble themselves too much with health and safety concerns.

She reached the top of the stair-case. More doors, all on one side this time. Three of them. And another stair-case leading to yet another floor. She opened the first door. It was dark, but there was just enough light seeping through the torn curtains to make out what was inside. There was an old single bed in here, no sheets or pillows, dirt-stains on the mattress. A bedside cabinet, with the door hanging off its hinges. Nothing else at all, but the smell of damp.

Why are you putting yourself through this? There's nothing here. Dexter died ten years ago. Walk away. But she couldn't. There were two more doors to investigate,

and then the top floor after that. She had to finish what she'd so unwisely started, whatever the consequences,

The next room was much like the first, save that this one had a pillow with a head-sized indentation in it. It smelled musty, as if this room had not been used for many, many years. For some reason, she got it into her mind that the head on the pillow was that of the last (human) person to live here, dying in bed and leaving his or her indentation as an echo of an empty life snuffed out. No-one to mourn them, no relatives to take over the house, no-one interested in buying a property which had been in terminal decline for decades. The perfect breeding-ground for trolls, she supposed, when they had moved in.

The third room was completely empty. Another few rooms like that, and she could leave this place forever.

The stair-case led up to the top floor. No hand-rail this time, though there was a line along the wall – dirty white on even dirtier white – where one had once been. She got to the top of the steps. The smell was worse up here, which was worrying. And three more doors. She would search them quickly, and then flee. Quite where she was going to go was another matter – she had no accommodation, no money and the Police would no doubt be looking for her in Ramsgate by now – but anywhere had to be better than here. Even the psychiatric hospital would be better than this.

She opened the first door, intending a cursory glance around the room before moving on to the next. But this

room was not like the others. This room had people in it. People with manacles on. People who looked at her with eyes as wide and frightened as spooked horses. But the thing that most freaked her out, was that none of them said anything at all. They just stared at her, their expressions an equal mix of puzzlement and terror, and then turned deferentially away.

One thing was certain. There were still trolls here. And if she was going to free all these manacled people, she was going to have to go and find the keys.

#

Maurice chuckled to himself when the agent pointed out the half eaten corpse up the tree. After all these years looking for Matilda, he was finally on her trail. And from the amount of blood that had dripped from the mutilated body on to the grass below, her trail was pretty damn fresh.

Maurice used to be an agent himself; indeed, he had headed up the department once upon a time. He had trained Crow to take his place at the NEA (Neanderthal Extermination Agency) when he had retired. Maurice was now in his early eighties, but the NEA still consulted him from time to time now that Crow was no longer there to veto his involvement. Crow had wanted nothing to do with him when he was alive, as the agent was convinced that Maurice and his wife were sick perverts. And to be fair on



his former protégé, he was quite right; they very much were. For a start, he had kept a young man captive in his cellar for the past ten years, for the sexual amusement of his ninety year old wife.

“That’s got to be troll-kill, right?” Agent Bishop asked, pointing up to the corpse.

Maurice suppressed a fast approaching fit of giggles. What else did they think it was? A badger! There were few animals in the wood which would have taken that much meat off the man, and he could not even begin to imagine which of them would then have stuffed the body up a tree! You didn’t tend to get all that many leopards in Kent in this day and age!

He nodded. Bishop put a comforting hand on his shoulder, mistaking his suppressed laughter for a sob. That was one of the great things about being elderly. Young people were so patronising that they always interpreted everything he said or did in the best possible light. Except when they were tied up and being filmed with his wife in various eye-watering poses; it was quite difficult for them to misinterpret that, especially when she was poking them up the bottom with turkey legs and miscellaneous meat products.

“This must be the one that got away from the research lab,” Maurice advised. “She’s different from the others. Much more cunning. Keep me informed, if you would. You’re going to need all the help you can get to track her down.”

The agent took a call when he was in mid-sentence. Young people had no manners nowadays. This one couldn't have been any older than his mid-forties; a mere child, as far as he was concerned. Maybe Maurice could find some pretext to lure him back to his house, and drug his custard creams? The boy in the basement had lost his mind a very long time ago, and it wasn't very nice for poor old Elsie to have to make love to a gibbering idiot. A fresh idiot was far preferable, and one from the NEA better still.

The fresh idiot ended his call. He looked at Maurice with concern. Maurice looked back with his most convincing amiable pensioner expression to put the boy at his ease.

“Is something the matter, young man?”

“Georgia Richardson escaped from a mental institution last night. You remember her? They're worried that she might come after you.”

Georgia! The girl who had rescued Matilda from the lab. She and her friend Keith had come to seek his advice on Neanderthals (“trolls” as she had misguidedly called them). He had drugged them both, but she had been rescued by Agent Crow of all people. Keith had not been so lucky, and had been in his cellar ever since.

It struck him that if he was ever going to capture a real live Neanderthal, then it would most likely be with her help. The NEA were useless now, as far as he was concerned, and if they captured Matilda they were hardly likely to turn her over to him for his genetics experiments anyway (he was determined to find out whether male

humans and female Neanderthals could successfully mate). But Georgia had spent time with Matilda; she knew her ways. And if she did not prove to be of any help in that respect, he could lock her in the basement with the other youngster. Why should Elsie have all the fun?

“I hope you’re not planning on assigning me protection? There’s really no need for my garden to be swarming with agents for months, just for the sake of a pretty little thing like her.”

“Two agents for three nights,” the agent replied. “Government cut-backs. And one of them can’t start until eleven, because he has an evening job stacking shelves at Asda to supplement his income. But the girl’s psychiatrist wants to come and see you in the meantime. You’ll like him. He’s pretty old. You’ll have a lot in common.”

#

Georgia approached the next door along the passageway. She was more frightened than she had ever been in her life. This was the first time she had been in the house *knowing* that there were trolls here. However nervous she had been before, she had been working on the basis that in all probability the place was empty. Now she knew it wasn’t. And not only did she have to stay here, but she had to find the trolls (who would hopefully be asleep during the day) and wander around amongst them until she found the key to the manacles, to set free the people in the next room.

Given the choice, she would have run. If only she could have left the building, contacted the Police, and left this to them to sort out. But who would believe her? A whole bunch of people chained up in a room in a house in Ramsgate of all places. With man-eating trolls in the room next-door. And all of this coming from a woman who had just escaped from a mental institution, having spent a decade there after having been declared insane after coming up with much the same story last time round. No, her options were either to sneak in amongst the trolls to liberate the key from them, or to run away and leave all those people here to die.

The stench hit her as she opened the door. She had assumed that the smell came from decaying bodies, but it must have come from the creatures themselves. She guessed that the nearest they came to a bath was rolling around in the occasional puddle.

There were four of them on the floor. Asleep, or pretending to be. She felt an almost overwhelming urge to close the door, and run for all she was worth. This was madness! She didn't have a hope in Hell of finding the key without waking them up, and then she would be in the room next-door, chained up with the others, part of a human breakfast buffet.

She fought back the panic. There were people in there whose lives depended on her. She had to do the right thing. Dexter was dead because of her. However dangerous this was, it was her only hope of atonement.

She closed the door behind her. Force of habit, she supposed, as there was no other reason for doing so. There was one male and three females. The male was snoring. She would start with him. Theirs was a backward society; she doubted that women's rights were very high on their agenda. If anyone had taken custody of the key, it would be him.

He stopped snoring when she was just a couple of yards away from him. She froze, partly so as not to make any noise, but mainly because her legs had gone on strike. She waited, and waited, and waited some more. Eventually, he started snoring again, louder than ever. She cursed him for being so noisy. He might wake the others, and then she would be well and truly bugged (and not in a good way).

She approached his prone body. He wore clothes, nasty grimy ones, but clothes all the same. He had pockets in his trousers. There was nowhere else he could secret a key (well, nowhere she would be willing to insert a hand, anyway). She would have to check his trouser pockets without waking him up.

She knelt down beside him, casting a look around her to make sure his companions were still asleep. She touched the rough material of his trousers, just above the pocket, to test whether it would wake him. The gesture was uncomfortably intimate; she was not in the habit of touching strange men's trousers whilst they were unconscious (or even when they were awake).

She slid a hand into his pocket, a millimetre at a time. To her distress, she discovered that he dressed on the left. He would be having some very interesting dreams by the time she had finished rummaging around for the key.

He stopped snoring again, and her heart almost stopped beating in response. She held her breath – she was breathing far too noisily – and waited, hand still in his pocket, praying that those heavy eyelids would remain firmly closed. He turned over onto his side, taking her hand with him. Fortunately, he turned over away from her, on to the pocket which remained inviolate, as her hand would otherwise have been trapped beneath him. He started snoring again.

There was no key in here. She was tempted to try one of the other trolls, but remained convinced that the male would have it. But how to gain access to his other pocket when he was lying on it?

She retrieved her hand, wiping it on her clothes with a grimace. She sniffed it; it smelled of raw meat; she tried not to dwell on why. She got silently to her feet, and inched her way round him. His massive head rested on the floor. There was the imprint of floor-boards on one side of his face where he had been sleeping. He was now lying on his left pocket. Only an inch or two of the top was accessible. She could squeeze maybe a couple of fingers and a thumb in there, but that was about all. The chances of retrieving the key seemed pretty remote. But she had to

try. Lives depended on her, and she wasn't going to abandon them, not this time.

She pinched her right thumb against her index and middle fingers, and tried to slide them into the troll's pocket. The angle was all wrong; her wrist was bent back on itself. She would have to use her left hand.

She scanned the room again. The others were still asleep. She looked back at the pocket. She fed her pinched fingers in to it, but met resistance after just an inch or two. Should she try to wriggle her fingers between his hip and the floorboards, or just beat a strategic withdrawal and wait for him to turn back over again?

She glanced at his face. His eyes were open, and he was leering at her. She screamed, waking the others. She tried to get to her feet, but he seized her wrist, and no amount of tugging would free it. He forced her on to her side, and pulled her close to him, face to face, like two lovers snuggled up in bed on a lazy Sunday morning (but for her frantic screaming). His family gathered round them, to examine this new addition to their larder.

“I like what you were doing in my pocket,” he said. “Do it again, and I'll make sure you're the last one to die.”

#

Dr Read liked being around pensioners. It made him feel young again.

He was sitting in the living room of a delightful couple, Maurice and Elsie, both of whom were considerably older than him. Elsie was keeping him supplied on the provisions front, producing a succession of cups of tea, and a veritable mountain of custard creams. He was enjoying the biscuits, but was beginning to regret the amount of tea he was drinking. It was a long drive back home, and his bladder wasn't quite as reliable as it had once been.

His guests were very friendly indeed. Elsie – who must have been thirty years his senior – kept giving him friendly winks every time she waved the biscuit-laden plate under his nose. Maurice was sitting next to him on the sofa, slightly closer than he was entirely comfortable with, but as a psychiatrist he was aware that elderly people's perception of personal space tended to blur over the years.

At one point he had heard growling from downstairs, and it emerged that they had even gone to the trouble of locking away their dog, as he could be a little boisterous with strangers and had the habit of pinching all the custard creams when everyone's back was turned. He thanked them for their thoughtfulness.

After his third cup of tea and Heaven knows how many biscuits (he was sure that Elsie was topping up the plate when he wasn't looking), he got down to business. He explained (as gently as he could, so as not to worry them unduly) that Georgia had escaped from the hospital the night before. She had never shown any signs of violence during the whole time he had been treating her, so they



were not to worry about their personal safety, but she had been insisting for a very long time that Maurice had drugged her. There was, he thought, a distinct possibility that she would turn up here to confront him. Maurice had assured him that he had been provided with police protection, and that he was sure that he could deal with the young lady if she did turn up, just as he had dealt with her last time round. He had accepted Dr Read's business card, however, and agreed to contact him straightaway if she did materialise here.

Dr Read regarded his half-consumed custard-cream.

"It's funny. She's been going on for years about your drugged biscuits, and now I'm finally getting to try them out for myself! I hope you haven't slipped anything in them when I wasn't looking!"

"As if we'd slip anything into you without your consent," Maurice replied, a glint in his eye.

"Although I am starting to feel a little light-headed."

"Psychosomatic," Maurice reassured him. "You're so used to hearing about drugged custard creams, that you've half convinced yourself that you're feeling giddy."

"You should be a psychiatrist! I am feeling a little giddy, though. How strange."

"Not really, Dear," Elsie said, squeezing up to him so he was packed tight between the two pensioners. "The amount of drugs I crushed into those bad boys, you should have been out like a light a quarter of an hour ago."

Dr Read gave her a weak smile. Maurice leaned across him, and gave her a jab in the ribs with a bony index finger.

“Pay no attention to her, she’s just teasing you. You are looking rather poorly, though. Why not take your shoes off, and have a lie-down on the settee?”

Dr Read tried to get to his feet but failed miserably. His legs had deserted him, and it was difficult to stand up anyway with Maurice and Elsie hemming him in on either side like a pair of geriatric bookends. With mounting panic, he realised that he *had* been drugged. Georgia had been telling the truth all along. And if she was telling the truth about that, who was to say that the rest of her story – however implausible – was not true, too?

He heard growling from downstairs. There was something in the cellar. And these abominable people were going to feed him to it as soon as he was unconscious.

He made one last attempt to get up, but his head was feeling so heavy. He needed to sleep. But he couldn’t. He couldn’t. He –

He lost consciousness. Elsie started removing his clothes, as fast as her badly arthritic hands would allow. Maurice looked on with approval.

“I thought he was never going to nod off,” Maurice chuckled, rolling his eyes in mock exasperation. “Those drugs must need replacing. They must be twenty years old by now. Do those things have sell-by dates?”

“It’s not the drugs,” protested Elsie defensively, as she attempted to pull Dr Read’s trousers over his brogues. “It’s those useless own-brand biscuits you keep buying. Next time, we use brand-name Bourbons, or you can do it yourself!”

#

Georgia awoke in a cave. This puzzled her at first as she wasn’t aware that there were any caves round here. There used to be tunnels at the sea-front where the trains came all the way to the beach years before she was born, and there was a cave in Margate, but that had been closed to the public ages ago. Once her head had cleared a little, however, it occurred to her that whereas it may have been closed to the public, this would hardly have deterred her troll captors from bringing her here. So “why?” might have been a better question than “where?” Why hadn’t they eaten her back at the house?

She was naked, and her left wrist was manacled to her right ankle. The manacles were not actually attached to anything else, so in theory she could have got up and made a break for it. But she was feeling nauseous from where they had knocked her unconscious, and she knew that it would be pretty hard to run like this (not to mention extremely undignified!).

There were a few torches in the cave, flickering fire, like the ones villagers always carry in black and white films

when they're driving vampires out of their gothic castles. She looked around. There were other people nearby, equally trussed up and just as naked, some of them awake and others not. As far as she could recall, some of them were the same people she had seen back in the House. She tried a reassuring smile at one of them, but he averted his gaze, as if he would get into trouble for looking at her. None of them said anything at all. She wondered what they had seen to make them too frightened even to speak.

There was a pile of clothes just a few yards away. The mere fact that she was naked in front of strangers would not ordinarily have bothered her at all; she had been on plenty of nudist beaches when she had been on holiday (rarely in England, as you always got leered at by perverts in sun-glasses), and she always found the experience liberating (the freedom of casting off her clothes, not the leering). There was not a great deal she enjoyed more than a spot of nude sunbathing and a swim in the sea. But this was different. She had not removed her clothes through choice; they had been taken from her whilst she was unconscious. And that was about as far from liberating as you could get.

She thought of shuffling over to the heap of clothes and recovering her stuff. Even just having her underwear back on would be something. But she decided against it. She would be unable to get her knickers over her manacled wrist and ankle, and there didn't seem to be much point in getting a beating for nothing.

A troll entered the cave, casting covetous looks towards her as he walked by. She wasn't sure whether it was lust or hunger, but figured that it was equally worrying either way. Then another one, followed by one of the trolls she had seen asleep on the floor in the House. They each filed past her, eyeing her up on their way past. Dirty buggers.

She looked around the cave, needing to be distracted if only for a minute or two. The looks they were giving her made her flesh crawl, and she had to find something else to focus on for awhile, so she could keep it together.

It was a fairly large circular chamber, with chalky white walls. There were paintings here and there: soldiers, a giant, wild animals. If this was Margate Caves, she had been here as a little girl, but could not remember very much about it at all. Had the trolls drawn these images, or were they there already? What did it matter anyway?

The trolls were entering the chamber thick and fast now. They were running out of room, and were starting to get irritable, jostling and snarling at each other. The only part of the cave that they did not fill was the area in which she and her fellow captives were lying. One of the trolls, short of space, stepped on a naked man a few feet away from her, but was immediately set upon by his neighbours, and it was as much as he could do to keep his feet. It was clearly not the "done thing" to trample on the buffet; at least they had some standards, even if they were pretty basic ones.

Fighting broke out near the entrance. More trolls were trying to file in, but there was simply no room for them inside, and the trolls already here were trying to push them back out again. This was going to “kick off” big time, and she was right in the middle of it.

And then there was silence. All of them shuffled reverentially around to face the far end of the chamber, and the aggression evaporated in an instant. She could not see who or what it was that had had this effect. All she could see from down here was stumpy troll legs.

“Ladies and gentlemen.” A gruff voice, but calming, authoritative. Someone strong enough to keep order over hundreds of unruly serial-killers.

“I have summoned you all here tonight, every Family member in the whole Land, as we are in crisis. For many thousands of years, ever since the Outsiders first encroached on our hunting grounds, they have been waging war against us, a war which has continued to the present day. While we hide from them, taking them only out of necessity and for Wedding Feasts, they pick us off, one House at a time.”

The crowd broke out in snarls of anger and frustration. This speaker sure knew how to work a crowd.

“Our numbers have dwindled. There was a time, before they built their towns, that our elders met in this cave to make decisions for the safety and welfare of our people. But now, the whole of our race can fit in it.”

“Well almost!” shouted a cramped wag from the back, which brought a round of applause from those of them who were still outside.

“If things continue as they are, we will be no more within a generation or two. All of us, all of our children, wiped from the face of the Land as if we had never existed, as the Outsiders have destroyed other noble species before us. But I say: No more!”

A roar of approval.

“No More!”

Another roar, even louder than the first. They were getting pumped up. Georgia was not remotely comfortable with this. She was naked and hog-tied in an underground cave jam-packed with hundreds of angry trolls. This could only end badly for her.

“No more! Ladies and gentleman, I present to you Matilda.”

Stunned silence, followed by a chorus of boos.

“I know what you are thinking, and for many years I felt the same way. This is a woman who betrayed her Family, sold them out to Crow so she could live with an Outsider. But she is repentant. For these last ten years, she has been living alone and broken in woodland a few miles from here.”

“Good!” shouted out the wag from the back, to further applause.

“Whatever she may have done in the past, however blameworthy her actions, we must put it behind us. For Matilda could be our last hope of salvation.”

Puzzled silence from the congregation.

“She has lived with Outsiders. She knows their ways. She will be our spokesperson, my interpreter when I go to see them. She will have her chance of redemption. She has cost the lives of over a dozen, but can save the lives of us all.”

The crowd lapsed back into silence, uncertain whether they should be clapping or booing at this point. They had all heard of Matilda, of what she had done to her own Family for the sake of a Wedding Feast, and it was incomprehensible to them that she had collaborated with the hated Crow for the sake of a meal on legs (especially one she had wanted to marry!). But this was KING, their leader, descendant of all the leaders they had ever had, and he was telling them that she was here to save them. How could someone as vile as this be their salvation, though?

“Tonight, Matilda will accompany me on a visit to the nearest Outsider. My son, Alexander, will come too. We will ask him to summon his KING. And we will offer the KING of the Outsiders a truce when he comes. They leave us in peace, and we do the same in return.”

“Except for Wedding Feasts,” someone shouted. “We’ve got to be able to eat them at weddings.”

“No. If they agree, then we don’t eat them at all.”



“And what if they say no? What if they keep hunting us down, like they always have?”

“Then we wait until the sun comes up, a sun that many of us have never dared see for the whole of our lives. And then we march against them. And we kill and we kill until there are none of them left, or none of us left, or nobody left at all.”

The crowd cheered so loudly that part of the ceiling caved in near to where KING was standing. Three people went down beneath it, and their comrades were on them like a flash, feeding on them to assuage the hunger and the frenzy which had been building up since the speech had begun. KING and Alexander waded in, pulling them off the terrified victims, and cuffing any of them who tried to go back for seconds.

“Enough!” KING shouted. “Enough! We are few in number already. I know you are hungry, we all are. But our local Families have been storing up Outsiders for us, who are waiting for us at the back. We will all eat well tonight, whatever Fate holds in store for us tomorrow.”

Georgia tried to bottom-shuffle away from the trolls who had turned towards her, but there was nowhere for her to go. She was hemmed in by other human sacrifices. Her back was wedged between the naked sagging flesh of a chubby middle-aged woman from Folkestone and an even chubbier bank manager from Canterbury.

Her time had come. Poor dear Dexter had died at the hands of these creatures, eaten alive to satisfy their

perversed appetites. And now she was going to meet the same fate.

#

Dr Read awoke. He was in a room without windows: a cellar maybe? His wrists were bound together, but his ankles were free. Someone had stripped him down to his underpants, which was rather disturbing to say the least. He noted with some anxiety that he appeared to have had some leakage, probably as a result of all the cups of tea which had been pressed upon him earlier. He supposed that this was the least of his problems, though.

There was a CCTV camera on the wall, with a little red light on it. It was trained towards him. He shouted to the camera for help, but none came.

He felt groggy. He could still hardly believe that Georgia had been telling the truth about the perverse pensioners drugging their biscuits. But she had been. He really wished he had believed her now; he would be safely back at the asylum if he had.

It was quite a large room; he supposed it must run the length of the entire house. His half was empty, but the far side was jam-packed with broken furniture and bric-a-brac, mementos of a time gone by. A tired twin-tub washing machine, fire-guards, tape-recorders with detachable microphones, a framed poster of a nubile tennis player hitching up her skirt to scratch her bare bottom; it was like

a 1970's museum over there. He might have been quite nostalgic under other circumstances.

Something moved in the wasteland of cast-off consumer goods from yester-year. There was something behind the washing machine. A pair of feet emerged from behind its base, accompanied by a series of groaned yawns. Someone was stretching their legs. The perverts had obviously captured someone else at the same time as him. Maybe the two of them could bust their way out together?

He got to his feet – which was not easy when your wrists were tied up and your knees were stiffening up – and went to investigate.

“Hello? Is someone there?”

The yawning stopped. It was suddenly very quiet indeed. Dr Read was starting to get nervous. He came to a halt a couple of yards away from the washing machine, waiting for his new companion to reveal himself. Everything would be fine if he was given a cheerful “hello” from his new friend. He could now see the legs up to the knees. They were bare, and he was painfully aware that he was, too (save for his uncomfortably damp Y-fronts). He was suddenly reluctant to introduce himself to this man whilst virtually stark naked; it was not the done thing in polite society.

He looked around for something he could use to cover up. A tennis racket with busted strings; not a great deal of use. A ceramic puppy with huge cartoon eyes; too tasteless. A grubby old “soda-stream”; too unhygienic. He settled on

the picture of the tennis player with the nice bottom; it would cover up his considerably less pert one, and a multitude of other things besides. He had to hold it at the top of the frame, as his hands were tied too tightly to allow him to reach the sides. It would do the job though.

He shuffled a couple of steps nearer, the picture clutched protectively in front of him to cover up his pants.

“Who’s there? Friend or foe?”

The man stood up, jack-in-the-box-sudden, making Dr Read jump out of his skin. He dropped the picture on his foot, relieved the frame was a light one (his predicament was bad enough as it was, without having broken toes to worry about). He snatched it back up again and tucked the top under his chin so it covered his chest, not out of modesty, but rather to put something – however flimsy – between him and his cell-mate. He took a few steps away. He could hear the CCTV camera whirring away as it followed him backwards.

It was a man, but not the nice, safe, rational one he would have preferred to be sharing the room with. This one was maybe thirty or so, with wide staring eyes, with such a deranged expression that Dr Read suddenly felt very uncomfortable indeed. He had long tangled-up hair, which looked as if it had not been combed for many years. And perhaps most disturbingly of all, he was wearing a woman’s thigh-length fur coat which remained closed at the front even though there was no belt upon it. It was almost as if it had been glued on to his skin.

Dr Read had a lot of experience of working with people with mental health issues, but none of them had looked quite as crazed as this. The man looked like a psychopath wearing his grandmother's clothing. He would have to use all his knowledge and experience of psychology if he was going to get out of this in one piece. Befriend the man, that was where to start. Show no fear, and befriend him.

He placed the picture carefully to the ground, and took a couple of steps forward. He held out his right hand for a hand-shake (but ended up raising his left hand too, which remained stubbornly bound to it).

“Dr Read,” he said. “And you are?”

“Kf.”

“I'm sorry. I didn't quite catch that?”

“Kf!”

“Kef?”

“Kf!” the boy bellowed at him, as if it was his fault that his diction was so very poor. He obviously had anger issues, which was rather worrying in the circumstances.

“Kf!” the boy shouted again, and rushed towards him, intent on doing him injury. Dr Read held out his hands in a placatory gesture, back-peddalling furiously to keep as much distance between them as possible without turning his back on him to run. He ended up against the wall beneath the CCTV camera, with the strange agitated creature grasping his shoulders.

“Kf!” the boy yelled into his face. From the smell of his breath, it had been some considerable time since he had had a good floss.

“Kf,” Dr Read nodded, attempting a reassuring smile, but failing dismally. “Your name is Kf.”

The boy bared his teeth. He was going to bite him! In panic, Read grabbed the fur-coat and tried to pull it over his assailant’s head. The boy screamed in agony, but the coat stayed firmly in place. My God, thought the psychiatrist, as the boy’s visible chest-skin turned red. It really is glued on! No wonder he’s angry! What sort of monster would do that to anyone? The same sort that would feed respectable medical practitioners drugged custard-creams, he supposed.

The boy was ready to have another shot at biting him, only this time he was so furious that he was likely to take a great big chunk out of his face. Dr Read tried to raise his arms to protect himself, but they were pinned between the two of them, and would not budge. He was powerless to fend off the crazed maniac. But help came from an unexpected quarter.

“Keith!” came a disapproving voice from a speaker near the CCTV camera. “We can’t see what’s going on. Take him over to the far wall, and bite him over there instead!”

Keith backed off, and waited for him in the centre of the room. He crooked a finger, and beckoned for the psychiatrist to join him out in the open. Read shook his

head, declining the invitation. He was perfectly happy where he was, thank you very much!

Stalemate. Keith could not eat him as long as he was pressed up against the wall, out of sight of the camera. But Dr Read was stuck here, unable to move as much as a step without the creature falling upon him. He couldn't stand here all day; he got puffed out just walking to the car after work. But all he could do was to press himself up against the wall, like a wavering suicide on a window ledge, and wait for developments.

Developments came sooner than expected. A door opened at the far side of the room, and Maurice appeared. He could see Elsie peering round behind him, not wanting to miss any of the action. Maurice had a cattle prod held protectively in front of him, waving it around like a metal-detector.

“Can you take one step forward, there's a good chap? So we can get a good look at you.”

Dr Read shook his head vigorously. He wasn't going anywhere.

Maurice closed the door behind him, much to Elsie's annoyance as she would miss all the fun now (it was always better live than on the telly). He locked it behind him and slid the key back to Elsie under the door, keeping eye contact with the psychiatrist the whole time.

“I'm asking you nicely. There's no point in you hanging about there. Go and say hello to Keith. He won't hurt you. He just wants to make friends. He's a big softy really.”

Read snorted. How stupid did they think he was? He had a psychology degree, but they were treating him like a five year old with learning difficulties!

“What have you done to him? That boy. He’s not right.”

“Nothing. We love him very much. And we’ve got fifty seven hours of saucy video-tape to prove it. I’m sure he enjoys our little sessions, deep down. And Elsie loves spending time with him, even when the camera’s off. Even pensioners are entitled to hobbies, you know.”

“Why the coat? Why glue fur on him?”

“Elsie’s idea. He’s supposed to represent a Neanderthal. I told her that they don’t have fur – they’re just like you and me, only bigger – but she said we’ve got to put something on him to make him different. Otherwise, we’d just have a naked young man running around in our spare room, and that would just be creepy!”

“He’s not – one of them, then?”

“How dare you? Keith is very much heterosexual, I can assure you. Except when I join in with Elsie’s role-play videos on Tuesday mornings and Friday afternoons, when he might be just a little bit gay.”

Keith whimpered, and tried to burrow into the safety of his coat. He had never been very keen on Tuesday mornings.

Read sought to clarify his question. “No, I mean he’s not a troll?”

“Neanderthal, please (there’s no such thing as trolls). No, he’s not. But when we get a real one, he’s going to breed



with her, and we'll then have all the Neanderthals we could wish for. Dozens of the little buggers. We may need to sell some of our old stuff to make room for them in here, of course. They don't like being too cramped."

Maurice went to pet Keith. Keith flinched, eyeing the cattle prod the whole time. He could have just plucked it from the old man's grasp, but his spirit was broken. He just cowered, and let the pensioner stroke his matted fur.

"Come on, Dr Read," Maurice said. "You're going to have to step away from the wall at some stage, so why not just get it over and done with? We need to see what's going on. I would ask Keith to pull you over here, but he's not very good at pulling. He's either passive or aggressive, depending on who's given the orders. If I send him in, he'll tear you to pieces, and poor old Elsie will miss the whole thing. So be a good egg and come over here, where we can get a good look at you. We'd both be terribly grateful."

Read was feeling faint. All of this talking of being eaten by a crazed young man in need of a good haircut was getting too much for him. He shook his head, and prayed the nightmare would end. This is Karma, he thought. The Universe is getting its revenge for what I did to poor Georgia at the mental health unit. But surely whiplash in a car accident would have been punishment enough; why did the Universe want him to be eaten by a lunatic, whilst being filmed by a pair of crazed OAPs?

“Then I have no choice,” Maurice said, shaking his head in sorrow. “I do so hate violence, but what else can I do if you won’t do this one little thing for me?”

He took a step forwards and zapped the psychiatrist with the cattle-prod. Dr Read felt his muscles going into spasm and his brain melting. He just about kept his feet. He was vaguely conscious of Keith gibbering with excitement, either through distressed familiarity at the electric shock or in excitement at his pending meal, it was difficult to tell which when his body was convulsing like this.

Maurice stomped his foot in frustration. “Fall over, damn you, fall over!”

He jabbed the cattle-prod into Read’s testicles. The psychiatrist felt his world exploding (and a whole lot besides). He cried out as his head struck the floor. It didn’t hurt; not compared to the pain from the cattle-prod itself. But he knew that now he was down, there was no hope for him. His brain was fizzing with agony and shock, though, and for some reason the realisation of his imminent death did not seem to be nearly as bad as he had feared it would be.

There was something furry coming towards him, like a giant otter. He giggled. A great big otter, coming to give him a cuddle. He tried to hold out a hand to stroke it, but couldn’t move. There was something round his wrists; he couldn’t remember what. He felt it licking his face, and some sort of liquid spurting on to his chest. The otter

seemed to have a human face, but that didn't matter. That didn't matter at all.

He giggled again. Georgia would never believe him when he told her about all this!

He passed away, amidst confused thoughts of pretty mental-patients, giant cuddly otters and family-sized packets of custard-creams.

#

Georgia waited; naked, hog-tied and very frightened indeed. She was just about to be torn to pieces by hundreds of pumped-up trolls, and there was nothing she could do to stop them.

But then the throng of trolls parted. Someone was coming through. Someone very large indeed.

KING stood before her. He was huge, even by troll standards. He had the same big lumpy face that they all had, as if he had been moulded from clay by someone who had given up when not quite done. His eyes looked intelligent, all-knowing, but there was something else there, too. And unfortunately for her, that something was hunger.

He slid one hand beneath her shoulders and another beneath her bottom, and lifted her into the air as if presenting his new-born baby to the world (whereas he was in fact showing it his supper). The others eyed her

enviously. There were plenty of other humans here to choose from, but she appeared to be their snack of choice.

“Ladies and gentleman,” KING announced. “Whatever happens with our negotiations, this may be the last time we get to eat Outsiders. So savour every last mouthful. The buffet is now officially open!”

They fell on the other prisoners in an instant, tearing them apart with frenzied relish. Some handed flesh around to their companions, others held on to it for all they were worth, fighting off anyone who tried to take it from them. Their table manners left a lot to be desired.

KING lowered Georgia down to face level. The two of them made eye-contact. Georgia held his gaze, frightened but defiant. There was nowhere to run; all she could do was hold her head up high, and check out without showing any fear. She would say die with dignity, though it was very hard to be dignified when you were stripped bare, your wrist was strapped to your ankle, and you had a troll’s stubby finger-tips poking you up the bottom.

“Stop!” cried a voice. She looked around, more out of idle curiosity than in hope. She knew her fate was sealed. But she recognised the face that had appeared by KING’s shoulder. It was Matilda, the troll she had helped rescue from the animal experimentation centre all those years ago.

KING had already opened his mouth to bite her shoulder. For a second, she thought he was going to tuck in regardless, but he patiently lowered her to the level of his

waist, growling at a young troll who tried to sneak a mouthful of her ribs when his attention was diverted.

“I know her,” Matilda told him. “She was one of the Outsiders who rescued me.”

“Then I am very grateful to her,” KING replied. “But I’m going to eat her all the same.”

“But she can help us, I’m sure of it.”

“How?”

Matilda thought for a few seconds, and then thought for a few seconds more. She shrugged. “I don’t know. I just have a feeling.”

KING raised Georgia up again, and turned her around like a giant corn-on-the-cob, selecting which part of her to eat first. He settled on her thighs. “She can help me by filling my stomach.”

“Stop!” cried Georgia.

“Oh, this is getting ridiculous,” protested KING. “Food’s not supposed to talk to you. It’s just supposed to keep its mouth shut while I eat it!”

“You want to speak to our King. The people next-door won’t know where he lives. He’s very secretive. But I do. I’ve been there before. I can take you to him.”

KING considered this. Matilda looked on with a pleading “can-I-keep-this-lost-puppy” expression, willing him to spare his supper. He looked from one of the women to the other, weighing up the pros and cons. The pro was that he really could use someone who knew where their King could be found. The con was that he was really peckish.

“You’d expect me to let you live in return?”

“Of course. Besides, if you’re going to tell our king that you’re willing to stop eating us, it wouldn’t look very good if you munched on your ambassador straight after shaking on it, would it?”

KING looked disappointed. What she said made sense, but she looked like she’d be really tasty, and there wasn’t much left of the other captured Outsiders by now. He needed to eat; he had a big day ahead of him tomorrow.

“What if we compromise? I could just take a chunk out of your bottom, and leave the rest of you intact. You don’t really need your bottom, do you? It doesn’t really do anything.”

“I can drive. You find me a car and some car-keys, and I’ll take you there tonight. But my bottom stays intact.”

We have a van. It belonged to the Ramsgate Family before they were exterminated. No-one else knows how to drive it.”

“I do.”

KING exchanged looks with a troll by his side. They had similar facial features, even leaving aside the lumpy face. His son, maybe? The troll nodded. KING nodded back. Matilda started grinning.

“We have a deal then. You have nothing to fear. Family never break their word. The others all die, though. It’s too late to save them, anyway.”

Georgia looked around. There was very little left of her companions, save for a scattering of bone and bloodied

flesh on the stone floor of the cave. She bowed her head to agree his terms.

“There is one other thing, though. Before we set off.”

His face clouded. He was not used to his dinner attempting to negotiate with him. “What is it? What do you want?”

“My clothes back. And you can move your fingers, too; I’m not a bloody bowling ball.”

#

They were in a very grubby, very old transit van with a “No tools are kept in this vehicle overnight” sign in the back. Georgia was driving, with KING in the passenger seat. Matilda and Alexander were in the back. All of the other trolls had stayed in the cave to finish off the leftovers.

Georgia had assumed that KING would try to stay out of sight, but she supposed that he had no choice but to stay in the cab with her. He was hardly likely to sit in the back with the others and trust her not to drive straight to the nearest police station or army barracks. And there was no chance at all of him curling up in the foot-well. It was hard enough for him to get his legs in as it was, even when she had pushed the seat right back for him.

Georgia had been lying through her teeth when she had promised to take them to her “King”. The chances of Buckingham Palace granting access to a twenty year old

transit-van squeezed full of militant trolls seemed very low indeed, and it was not even as if 10 Downing Street would be any more accommodating. But as they were setting off, she had a flash of inspiration. She would take them to Maurice, the expert in trolls who had tried to drug her on her last night of freedom. If anyone would know what to do with a van-full of trolls, it would be him. And if it didn't work out, there were few people in the world who were more deserving of being eaten than him.

She drove towards his bungalow. She prayed that he was still living there after all this time. She would be killing two birds with one stone; her friend Keith had last been seen in the old man's company, and she needed to find out what had happened to him. She had lost Dexter, but maybe fate had been kinder to her other accomplice.

"How come you guys have a van?" she asked.

KING said nothing. She waited a moment or two, but he was obviously not inclined to talk. She persevered. She needed to fill the silence.

"What happens when we get there? Do you want me to come in with you?"

Still no reply. That was just rude, as far as she was concerned. She would keep talking until she got some sort of response, even if it was just a grunt or a fart or something.

"Are you not talking to me? I'm the one who should be upset here, after all you've done to me!"



He turned to face her. She looked away from the road for a second to see what sort of mood he was in, whether she had over-stepped the mark. He looked irritated, but did not appear to be on the verge of biting her (which was the main thing).

“What do you eat?” he asked.

“Sorry?”

“What-do-you-eat?”

“Lots of stuff. Chicken. Pasta. Bacon sandwiches. I used to be a vegetarian, but-”

“And are you in the habit of holding conversations with your food?”

“Not as a general rule, no.”

He turned away again, the discussion over as far as he was concerned. She was not keen to give up so easily, though. There was no radio in the van, and she was bugged if she was going to spend the next fifteen minutes drive in total silence, like a monk with laryngitis.

“Having said that, if my bacon sandwich started talking to me, I’d be pretty curious to find out what it was it wanted to say. “Help!” would be my guess, but you never know. Maybe it would have some totally new perspective on Life, or would suggest some huge medical breakthrough which might save thousands of lives a day.”

“You think a sandwich could teach you about medicine?”

“Maybe,” she shrugged, knowing that she wasn’t on the strongest of ground here, but at least she’d got him talking.

“Then maybe Outsiders are even stupider than I give them credit for.”

She laughed in spite of herself. And then she laughed some more. Rather worryingly, she had quite some difficulty stopping. Now was not a good-time for a nervous breakdown. Mind you, in the unlikely event that she survived this ordeal, she’d be back in the psychiatric hospital sooner or later, so at least they would have a genuine psychological illness to treat this time round. Dr Read was going to be over the moon about that.

“No more talk of sandwiches. Just drive,” he said.

So she did.

#

Alexander watched Matilda as she sat in the back of the transit van, hugging her knees to her chest. She was very attractive; just the right amount of bloatedness to her face, just the one facial wart, and a nice trim waist of maybe forty five inches or so. If it wasn’t for her history, she’d be quite a catch.

He knew all about her; the whole Family did. She had abandoned her House to live with an Outsider. Agent Crow had gone after her – as he had gone after countless Family before her – and she had struck a deal with him. She had told him where her Family was living, in return for her freedom. It was a despicable thing to do.

He had expected to loathe her when his father had sent him to collect her from the woods. But she was not at all what he had expected. If it wasn't for her tendency to form romantic attachments to her meals, she would be the perfect woman.

“I still don't understand how you could put an Outsider ahead of your own Family,” he said. “I'm not being mean; I'm just puzzled. It doesn't make any sense to me.”

She looked distressed. “It wasn't like that.”

“Then what was it like?”

She paused awhile to collect her thoughts, to work out how to put everything into context. So much had happened to her. It was hard to explain it all in a minute or two. She decided to start from the beginning.

“Nanny was an Outsider. When I was a child, she told me stories, stories of a place where everyone was allowed to go out whenever they wanted, where there was “daylight”, where no-one was allowed to beat anyone else, no matter what they'd done. And I wanted to be there, more than anything in the world. And then along came Philip, who was going to be my Wedding Feast, but I saved him. And I asked him to save me in return.

At first, he wasn't too keen, but then he started to get to like me a little, and we were going to get married. But Crow came to see me on the morning of the wedding, and he said that he was going to find the House anyway, whether I helped him or not, but if I told him where it was to save time then he would spare Mummy, and spare

Vincent, and spare Philip. If not, then everyone would die, and all that would be on my conscience. So I told him, not for myself, not even just for Philip, but for Mummy and Vincent, too. I didn't want them all to die just because of me."

She started weeping uncontrollably. He moved over to her side to put a comforting arm round her, but she pushed him away. "No! I don't want your pity. I don't deserve it. I was stupid to trust him. He killed Mummy and Vincent right in front of me. I didn't know Outsiders tell lies. Why did nobody tell me that?"

"Why don't you tell the others what you just told me? It would make things easier for you."

She lapsed into silence, punctuated by the occasional gulping sob, as if she was struggling to breathe.

"Matilda?"

"Tilly. Everyone calls me Tilly. Or they did before I got them all killed."

He tried to put an arm around her again, but she would have none of it. She shrugged him off. They sat there in the darkness, listening as the van accelerated. There was no other sound save for her laboured breath.

"You must have had feelings for him, all the same, this Outsider of yours." He sounded just the tiniest bit jealous.

"Do you know what's really bad?" she replied. "I can't even remember what he looks like now. Isn't that awful? I could at first, but after all that time in the woods on my own, I started to forget. And Mummy. And Vincent, too.

All I can remember is Daddy's face when he was hurting me. And Mummy, when they cut her up and left her body by the cage they put me in. Why would they do that to her? Why can I only remember the bad things?"

She burst into bitter tears. He hugged her. She tried to push him away yet again, but he ignored her. After a few seconds, she clung on to him as if her life depended on it, and sobbed herself into him. He hung on to her, willing her to feel better, trying to forget what she had done, what she was.

The engine stopped. The back doors opened. A guilty-looking Alexander released her just in time, uncertain what his father would make of it if he saw his son consoling her. She was back in the fold – they needed her, and his father was in any event determined that every last member of the Family should be there that night – but she would never be fully forgiven, not after selling out her House to Crow. KING would want him to marry, to have a Wedding Feast of his own (subject to any agreement to the contrary with the Outsiders), but not with Matilda. His father had many admirable traits, but even *his* capacity for forgiveness and tolerance had limits. Be kind to her, KING had instructed him. But kindness fell well short of giving her a cuddle in the back of a works van.

#

There was a knock on the door. Maurice was in two minds whether to open it. It was probably Georgia, come to see him following her escape from the psychiatric hospital. But Elsie was still scrubbing Dr Read's blood off the floor (and the walls and ceilings), and she was the only one who knew how to drug a custard cream. It seemed unlikely that the young lady would fall for that twice in any event. She was a good looking young lady who would look very appealing when stripped butt-naked and placed in front of the CCTV camera, but the fact that she was pretty did not necessarily mean that she was stupid. She had had enough cunning to escape from the psychiatric hospital, after all.

Another knock. Maybe he should go and get Elsie? Safety in numbers. But then it might be those two agents, sent to protect him. Maybe they just wanted to use the toilet; surely even young people couldn't hold it in all night? What would they think if Elsie was there, blood dripping from her nylon apron as if she was Sweeney Todd's cleaning lady?

His dilemma was solved when his door was ripped off its hinges. Three Neanderthals walked in, Georgia scurrying along behind them. Two of them were male, one was female. One of the males was huge, bigger than he could ever have predicted. If he could talk them all into joining his Neanderthal mating programme, then he would die a very happy man. And if he couldn't, he would die a very battered one.

The big Neanderthal held out a paw for him to shake. He took it with a great deal of circumspection, expecting his hand to be crushed, but the handshake was surprisingly gentle.

“KING,” said the Neanderthal.

“Maurice,” he replied.

“King Maurice?”

“If you like. Georgia, so nice to see you again. Can I offer you any refreshments?”

She slapped him hard across the face. “That’s for drugging me,” she said.

“There seems to have been some sort of misunderstanding. You fainted, and I was just loosening your clothing when Agent Crow -”

“Enough,” KING ordered. He pushed Georgia forward. “We have more important things to discuss. Tell him. You can put it better in your language.”

“I can assure you I can understand you perfectly well without this young lady having to interpret.”

“Tell him.”

Elsie entered the room. Just as Maurice had feared, she was covered in blood. No-one seemed to be phased by this, though, save for Georgia. In fact, the Neanderthals seemed positively excited by this development. Maybe he could bribe them into joining his mating programme (and the occasional sex session with Elsie on CCTV) if he procured enough tasty victims to keep them happy? He would need a lot more biscuits, though, especially after the number of

custard creams Read had munched his way through before having the decency to pass out.

“You’re a big one,” Elsie told KING, never one to beat about the bush. “Do you fancy a cuddle?”

KING tried to mask his disgust. He had come here to negotiate with these people, to try to save his people from extinction. And all he had got so far was an offer to mate from the Queen of the Outsiders, who looked at least half a century past her sell-by-date. Mind you, he did have the urge to lick the blood off her, like a geriatric ice-lolly.

He turned to Georgia. “Tell them now. Or I’m going to eat everyone in this room. Starting with you.”

“This is KING, leader of all the trolls in the country.” KING snarled at the word “troll”, but she carried on regardless, claiming this as a moral victory. “He comes in peace, to speak with King Maurice. He offers a truce. If we stop killing his people, then he will leave ours alone. And he wants you to tell me where Keith is.”

“Not that last thing,” contradicted KING. “I come in peace, like she says, but I don’t know anything of anyone called Keith.”

Maurice ushered Elsie over. “My Dear, can you show Georgia to Keith’s bedroom, please, while I speak to these gentlemen?”

“Bedroom?” asked Elsie blankly.

“Where we lock him up,” Maurice whispered to her.

“Oh, *that* bedroom,” she nodded. “Follow me.”

“He’s alive?” Georgia asked incredulously.



“Very much so,” Elsie assured her, as she led her from the room. “I was riding him just this morning. He’s such a nice boy. And I’m sure he’ll be very glad to see you, he doesn’t get to see his friends very much.”

Maurice turned back to his guests, his arms open wide in a gesture of friendship (or as wide as he could open them with his rheumatic shoulders).

“King Maurice welcomes you. You shall be my guests here, and have whatever you desire. My palace and my wife are at your disposal.”

“Then we have a truce?” enquired KING, a little surprised at how easily his mission had accomplished its objectives. “No more killing on either side?”

“You have my word on it.”

It was then that the two agents – sent to protect Maurice from Georgia – burst into the room, guns blazing. And everything kicked off, big time.

#

As soon as Georgia stepped into the room, Elsie slammed the door behind her, locking her inside. She heard the old lady cackling in delight from the other side of the door. Georgia wondered if she would find it quite so amusing when KING and Alexander ate her.

She tugged hard on the doorknob, but the door stayed stubbornly shut. She kicked it, she punched it, she screamed abuse, but all to no avail. And then she heard

gunshots, and decided that it was probably better to stay in here after all.

She looked around the room. No windows, and a CCTV camera on the wall, like some kind of prison cell (save for all the crap piled high on one side of the room). Worse still, there was blood all over the place. A mop and bucket sat in one corner. Someone – presumably Elsie – had tried to wash the floor, but had only succeeded in smearing the blood around in a series of crimson arcs.

There was an elderly man at the far end of the room, lying on the ground with his back towards her. He was dressed in nothing but a pair of soggy Y-fronts. There was a trail of blood leading from just under the CCTV camera to where he lay, presumably mapping the route through which he had been dragged.

“Hello?” she called out, nervous at approaching him. “Are you okay?”

Silly question, she chided herself. He’s lying on the floor in a huge puddle of his own blood, and you’re asking him if he’s alright!

He didn’t move, or show any other signs of life. She thought she heard something behind her, over by the big twin-tub washing machine, but could see nothing there when she turned round to check it out. She would have to go and take a look behind it at some stage. But first she would have to see if the man in the pants was dead.

She walked over to him. His face was turned to the wall. “Hello?” she whispered. “Can you hear me?” But it appeared he could not. He just lay there, as still as silence.

Another noise, behind her. She thought she saw movement; something ducking back behind the washing machine, but she was probably imagining it. After all she had been through since her “escape” from the hospital – going through sleeping trolls’ pockets, being captured by them, watching them eat her fellow captives in the cave – she couldn’t blame herself for being a little jumpy. At least she had her clothes on this time!

She squatted down, took hold of the man’s left arm, and rolled him over. It was Dr Read, and he was very, very dead. It looked like something had been eating his face; she could see into his mouth where his cheek should have been, and there were ragged chew marks all over his forehead.

She screamed. And then there were footsteps behind her, something or someone running at her at speed, barging into her, shunting her across Read’s mutilated corpse. She struck the wall, forehead first, and collapsed on top of him. She struggled to push herself away from him, but there was something on top of her, pinning her down, trying to bite her scalp. With all her strength, she rolled over on to her side, and her assailant toppled off her. Without wasting time looking at him, she was on her feet and running to the door, hammering on it, praying that whoever was outside, whoever had fired those shots, would come to her rescue.

She no longer cared what they would do to her out there; all she knew was that she had to get out of this room, or she would die.

Hands gripped her biceps, and threw her away from the door, back towards the centre of the room. She stumbled, and fell to the ground. He was on her in an instant, homing in on her face, all flashing teeth and fury. It was a man, about her age, dressed in nothing but a woman's 1970's fur coat which was far too small for him. And she knew him, and the fact that she recognised him was almost as bad as the fact that he was trying to eat her alive. This was Keith, one of the two men – little more than a boy back then – who had helped her liberate the troll from the experimentation centre what seemed like a lifetime ago. This was her friend, with whom she had grown up, gone clubbing with, and on more than one occasion had been close to giving a sympathy shag. And now she was nose to nose with him, pushing his shoulders away from her in a desperate attempt to keep those gnashing teeth away from her nose.

“Keith!” she screamed at him. “Keith, it's me, Georgie!”

He stopped. She maintained her grip on his shoulders, refusing to accept that her ordeal was at an end. He looked at her in confusion.

“Kf?” he asked.

“It's me. Georgie. We were friends, remember? Please remember. Friends”

“Kf?”

“What have they done to you?”

Keith suddenly looked horror-stricken. He jumped to his feet, covered his face, and ran back behind the washing machine, squealing like a stuck pig. She followed him, her concern for him temporarily overriding her fear.

“Keith, it’s okay. I’m not going to hurt you”. Not unless you try and rip my face off again, she thought. She put her hand out towards him, as if introducing herself to a nervous, snappy dog. He shuffled backwards a few inches, but stopped squealing. There was a haunted look in his eyes which made her bleed inside.

“Georgie?” he asked. And his voice was clear, and human, and Keith again, just for an instant, just for that one word.

She hugged him. He clung on to her, and wept for all he was worth. She snuggled into him, reassuring him as a mother would her crying baby, trying to ignore the voice in the back of her mind which whispered to her that he could turn at any moment and that she was mad to get this close to such a dangerous animal. He is not a dangerous animal, she retorted, he’s my friend. And then in turn she chided herself for arguing with herself in her head. Maybe she was mad after all.

When he was finished, she pulled away a little, and looked him up and down. “What’s all this about?” she joked, tugging at the fabric of his fur coat. But as she pulled on the material, he howled in pain, and she realised that the fur had been glued to his chest. He pushed her

away in anger, and for a second she thought that he was going to set upon her again. But instead he lapsed into sulky silence, hugging his knees, and rocking back and forth, muttering “Kf,” all the while.

There was the sound of a key in the lock, and the door was flung open. Elsie rushed into the room, as quickly as her artificial hip would allow.

“Maurice!” she screeched. “They’ve taken my Maurice!”

Keith watched her, his forehead creased in concentration, trying to make sense of her words. Eventually, realisation dawned. Maurice was gone. The man who had beaten him, and cattle-prodded him, and made him do things with the old lady which made him feel sick; that man was no longer here to bully and torment him. Get rid of the old lady, and he was free.

Before Georgia could stop him, he had fallen on Elsie and was tearing her wrinkly limb from limb. All of the pain, all the degradation, all the everything-he-had-endured, all taken out on one frail old lady in the space of forty five seconds of frenzied slaughter. And then he was weeping again, and clinging on to Georgie, wanting to beg her to stay with him always and make sure that this never ever happened to him again.

But all he could say was “Kf.”

#

Back in the van, with a very nervous King Maurice behind the wheel. Alexander sat next to him, a massive hand wrapped around the old man's scrawny thigh, ready to tear him to pieces if he even thought about making a run for it.

Matilda and KING were in the back with the bodies of the two agents who had had the audacity to shoot at them. When the agents had appeared amongst them, guns in hand, Matilda had been the first to react, seizing one of them and dashing his head against the mantelpiece. He was still twitching, so she did it again, and he stopped.

Both agents had been targeting KING, not least because his size had made him the easiest target in the room. He took two or three bullets, staggering backwards and falling on to the fussy floral sofa, which buckled under his weight.

Alexander was on the second agent in an instant, dealing him a punch to the temple which instantly snapped his spine. He then went over to his father, helping him off the couch as Matilda seized the two furtive pensioners who were attempting to slip unnoticed out the open door.

KING gently pushed his son away. "I'm all right. It just stings a little."

"You've been shot," Alexander fretted. "I've seen this happen before, and they died both times. We need to get you help."

"I just need a little rest."

"Maybe a cup of tea and a biscuit?" Elsie ventured, more in hope than expectation. They ignored her.

“Where’s the girl?” Alexander asked.

“Gone,” Elsie told him in her most credible voice. “She’s run away while you were fighting. I’ve definitely not locked her up or anything. Hey! Look at the state of my settee! Which one of you naughty boys did that? I hope you’re going to pay for it.”

“Shall I go after her?”

KING shook his head. “No point. It doesn’t matter what she tells them. They’ll know all about us soon enough anyway.”

“If you don’t have any money,” Elsie went on, I’m sure we could work something out. We could all have a bit of a cuddle until you’ve paid off your debt in a year or two.”

And now they were back in the van, with King Maurice as a hostage in the front with Alexander, and Matilda tending to KING in the back, as best she could. Perhaps wisely, they decided to leave Elsie behind. She was freaking them out a bit.

“Are you going to be all right?” Matilda asked KING, the moment the van doors had closed on them.

He shook his head. He was struggling to stay conscious. He was losing blood; she could see it on his clothes around his stomach and his left leg. She took off one of the agents ties and wrapped it over the wound on his thigh to try to stop the blood coming out, but it didn’t seem to make much difference. She tried the same thing with the other agent’s tie to stem the bleeding from KING’s stomach, but he winced when she tried to lift him up to slide it beneath



his body, and she knew that the tie was not going to be anywhere near long enough to circle his waist in any event. She abandoned her attempts at first aid, deciding that she was doing him more harm than good, as usual.

“Don’t tell Alexander,” he instructed her. “Don’t tell anyone. They have to believe I’ll be there for them tonight. This is the biggest night in Family history, and they need to think I’ll still be with them tomorrow morning, come what may.”

“What will happen if you - go?”

“Alexander will take over. But not tonight. They need me tonight.”

He started coughing. A few specks of liquid settled on her cheek. She wiped them off with the back of her hand. She hoped they were not blood.

“Thank you,” he said. “For what you did in there. I wasn’t sure whose side you’d be on. I’m glad you were on ours.”

She bit her tongue. This was supposed to have been a compliment, but it didn’t feel like one. Of course she would be on his side; he was Family (and not just any Family either, but KING no less!) Yes, she had taken Philip’s side against the world, but he was dead now. She had had enough of her lonely solitary confinement in the woods. She needed to *belong* again. The Outsiders had locked her up, and killed Mummy, Daddy, Vincent and just about everyone else besides. How could she not be on

KING's side after all that? And she was definitely on Alexander's side; he was rather nice.

He started coughing again. She felt moisture on her face, more this time than before. She wiped her hand over it, and inspected her palm. It was red. There was blood on his chin, too. She licked the blood off her hand, but then felt guilty. It didn't seem appropriate, somehow. He had the merest hint on his face now, though, as if he approved, but then started hacking up blood again.

"You can't fight them," she told him. "Not like this."

She waited for his coughing fit to subside. He was trying to speak. She put her ear close to his mouth. He coughed again, sending a lungful of viscous liquid into it. She persisted. He tried again, but eventually gave up. His breathing stopped.

She closed his eyes, and clutched his hand, and cried for his son and his people.

#

Matilda watched KING's body burn.

They were back in the Shell Grotto, in the altar chamber in which Matilda had first met her monarch. He had seemed so calm, so confident, that she had almost believed that he could lead them all to victory over the Outsiders if war was declared. But he had fallen at the first hurdle. The omens were not good for tomorrow.

For some reason, she was starting to feel resentful towards him. He had said he would be there for them the following morning. They needed him. But instead of being their general, all he could manage was to fuel their fire.

Alexander stood near the flames, so close that she was worried that he might burn too. As the flames flickered warm light across the stone walls around him, Family filed into the chamber a few at a time, to pay their respects to KING, and to pass on their commiserations to his son. Some of them hugged him, but most were uncomfortable getting quite that close to the fire. He exchanged words with all of them, but his face remained impassive. He was their leader now, and he could not show any weakness; not even the natural grief of a bereaved son.

She recognised Kaye, from the Margate clan. There was no sign of Maggie. Both women regarded each other uncomfortably, neither of them speaking. Kaye had eaten Philip's father as a Wedding Feast. Kaye then gave her a big, malicious wink; the vicious little minx! Matilda turned away in disgust, resisting the urge to smash her face in. It wouldn't have been seemly to start a fight at a funeral.

There were a few children amongst those who were paying their respects. Matilda had assumed that they would stay here whilst the grown-ups went to war, but Alexander was wishing everyone good luck in the battle, children included, and it dawned on her that no-one would be left behind. When dawn broke, the whole of her people – every single one of them – would be marching off into battle. It

would be all or nothing. Either they would be victorious tomorrow, or they would be wiped off the face of the Earth. The latter seemed far more likely.

Finally, the ceremony was over. The last few women left the chamber, one of them with a baby on her hip. Surely she wouldn't fight tomorrow, not when she was nursing?

She moved over to Alexander, and took his hands in hers. He smiled at her, the small taut smile of a child trying to be brave. She smiled back. She wanted to hug him, but thought better of it. He was KING now.

"How can I do this without him?" he asked. "There must be thousands of Outsiders. Maybe they have more guns."

"Maybe more than thousands," she replied. "Maybe many more guns."

"But I must do this anyway. However it ends."

She nodded. It was his choice, and she would follow him wherever he took them.

They stood facing each other, so close to the flames that she could feel her skin glow an angry red. He was closer still to the fire, a mere couple of feet away from his roasting father.

She took a step closer, so there was nothing between them save for the smell of burnt flesh. She had the urge to kiss him, but smothered it. She was ugly; they were having a special moment, and she didn't want to ruin it by seeing him recoil in disgust.

"KING is dead," he mourned, gripping her hands tightly for support.

“Long live KING,” she whispered in reply.

#

Audrey Watkins walked slowly along Margate beach, her Jack Russell galloping in giddy circles nearby. Fifteen minutes exercise, and then back indoors, in the warm. The shops would be open by then. She would buy a newspaper on the way back, sit in her twelfth floor flat by the station, and dream of better times.

Last year had been truly awful, her anus horribilis as the Queen would say (or something like that, she was not very good with Latin). Her husband had left her, for a maths teacher of all people! She had lost her job as a result of Government cutbacks in the public sector. And she had now been prescribed anti-depressants, which were stored away in a drawer at home as she was too scared to take them in case she got hooked. The doctor said that they weren't addictive, but doctors always say that. It was bad enough being an unemployed divorcee, without being a junkie as well!

Just when she thought that her life couldn't get any worse, she spotted hundreds of people swarming on to the far-end of the beach, up at the clock-tower end. This annoyed her. She liked to have some peace and quiet when she was walking Pixie. If she had wanted company, she would have walked her later in the day, when there were more people around.

Worse still, they all looked like tramps. Great big tramps, with ragged clothes, who would no doubt be on the look-out for hand-outs. It was bad enough having one of them begging for money, but there were hundreds of them! She couldn't even tell them to get a job now, not now she was unemployed too. Best to leave the beach, and come back later when they had moved on.

A few of them started running across the sand towards her. She stopped. She didn't like the look of this, not one bit. Pixie scuttled onwards, oblivious or indifferent to her mistress' sudden sense of intense unease.

"Pixie," she called tightly. "Come here!"

She got the lead ready for her Jack Russell's return. Pixie showed no interest in it, preferring to squat and do her business in the sand. The Council would not be best pleased!

The tramps were only a hundred yards or so away by now. She could just about make out their faces. They were weird; all distorted and lumpy, as if covered in bee-stings or something. She had seen people with knees like that – her poor Mum's rheumatism played her up something chronic – but never faces. What if they were ill? Did people still have leprosy nowadays? Maybe they were all on a protest march for equal rights for lepers?

The lead tramp picked up Pixie, took an exploratory nibble out of her little back, wrinkled his nose in disgust and hurled her back towards Mrs Watkins like a furry little coconut at a fairground. The dog dropped harmlessly a few

yards to her left. She was still alive, thank goodness, but that wasn't the point. Okay, these men may have been homeless, and they may (possibly) have been lepers, but that did NOT give them the right to do that to a poor defenceless animal, especially *her* poor defenceless animal. She loved that little dog; it had proven to be an awful lot more loyal than her ex-husband for a start. Pixie would never have had her head turned by the promise of illicit trigonometry, as he had done.

She had had enough. Life had punched her in the face once too often, and she would have her revenge or die in the attempt. With a scream of rage, she set off towards Pixie's assailants, the lead raised above her head to thrash some repentance into them.

They were far from equally matched. The irresistible force of Neanderthals swamped the eminently-movable object that was Mrs Watkins, and tore her to indignant pieces. All the Council found of her afterwards was a hand, still tightly clutching a dog-lead. It had not been her year at all.

#

Having cleared the beach of Outsiders and Jack Russells, they turned their attention to the town. There were few shoppers around at that time of the morning, but a number of people were filing into town to start work, and there were also more than enough shop-assistants to go round.

The Neanderthals swarmed over the sleepy town-centre, wreaking havoc as they went.

Alexander walked into McDonalds, still blinking out the sharp sunlight from his watering eyes. It was not actually very sunny out there – just a dull winter grey – but he had lived in darkness all his life, just as Family had been forced to shun the daylight for many, many thousands of years. They had been creatures of the light once; KING had told him stories – passed down from generation to generation - of what life had been like before the Outsiders had forced them from their hunting grounds and started their campaign of systematic extermination. Now they had finally seen the sun again, and although it made his eyes water, it felt very good indeed. It felt like freedom.

There were a half-dozen tiny people sitting at a quarter-dozen tiny tables, tucking into their funny little food in a box. There were other people at the back behind a counter, wearing hats and identical clothes.

Two of his tribe followed him in. There had been three of them, but one of them (Henry) was so transfixed by the way the door opened without anyone touching it, that he just stayed at the entrance, taking one step forwards and one step back as the door opened and closed in front of him. It didn't matter. They would be more than enough without him.

Alexander seized the nearest Outsider and hurled him at the men and women behind the counter, keen to set them



panicking, just in case they had guns like King Maurice's men. His Family went into action. All the Outsiders started screaming, running to the door, running back again when they saw Henry opening and closing it, fighting each other to find a way out. But there was no escape. Within a minute, they were all dead, never to eat a Sausage McMuffin Meal ever again.

One of the trolls started tucking into an Outsider, but Alexander pulled him away. He did not know how many Outsiders there were in the Land, but he knew that there were many thousands; maybe even more than that. They would each have to kill dozens of them, before the others gave up the fight. And when the Outsiders surrendered, it would be their turn to live in the darkness, whilst Family claimed the sunlight for their own.

#

Georgia was watching television at Maurice's house. Elsie was very much dead, and Maurice was nowhere to be seen. Keith had been in such an agitated state that she had thought about locking him back in his room and calling Social Services, but he would surely be sectioned and she knew from bitter experience what that was like. It was her fault he was like this; she had told him to go with Maurice when they were trying to track Matilda down. She would stay here with him, while she thought of some way out of this mess which would not hurt him even more.

The up-side was that there was a lot of food in the house. She had not eaten since her so called “escape” from the psychiatric hospital, and she had just got through about four sandwiches before her hunger was satiated. There was plenty more stuff in the fridge freezer (all economy-meal crap pumped full of e-numbers and horse-meat, no doubt, but beggars couldn’t be choosers). They could hole out here for a week or more, if they chose.

The down-side was that Maurice only had five TV channels to watch, and Keith had opted for Jeremy Kyle. He sat there transfixed, making little mewling noises as Jeremy berated someone for cheating on their partner with his lap-dancing grandmother (or something like that; her frequent sorties into the kitchen for top-up sarnies had made it tricky to work out precisely what was going on). At one point, Keith had left the busted sofa to stroke Jeremy’s face on the screen. She had had enough. Ignoring his furious howls of protest, she turned over to the breakfast news.

There on the 21-inch screen was very shaky camcorder footage of trolls running amok. There was an art-gallery, a surprising amount of screaming coming from just two or three hysterical people, and two trolls wiping their bottoms on what looked suspiciously like Tracey Emin drawings. One of them looked at the camera-person, giving him a huge wink. The camera started retreating at speed. The troll gave the last finishing dab to his bare buttocks and set off unsuccessfully in pursuit, crashing to the ground when

tackled by his own half-mast trousers (much to the amusement of his companion).

Margate. They were saying this was Margate!

She seized Keith and dragged him away from the television. “Kf!” he shouted at her in protest, pointing furiously back towards Jeremy Kyle. “Kf!” But she was having none of it. Plucking Maurice’s car-keys from the fussy little occasional table by the front-door, the two of them set off on what was to be their final journey together.

#

Matilda was in the “Mechanical Elephant”, the big pub on Margate sea-front. Alexander had tasked her with looking after Maurice. She was uncertain whether this was because he trusted her, or because he wanted her well away from the fighting, but either way it was nice to be valued.

There was a long bar running down the left hand side of the room as they entered. She was with two young males, who had been put on guard duty with her. They stowed Maurice behind the bar, and went to investigate the bottles stowed in the cold glass boxes at their feet. They had stolen the occasional milk bottle in their time, but these bottles had metal lids which were tricky to remove, and hurt your mouth if you tried to bite them off. Eventually, they hit upon striking the necks of the bottles against the corner of the bar, which did the trick. And then they started

to drink the liquid inside, which ranged in colour from dark brown to urine. They had discarded the fizzy black ones after just one sip, as they had a strange sugary taste which made them wrinkle their battered noses in disgust.

As her two companions worked their way through the bottles of ale and lager, Matilda kept an eye on Maurice. She had been given a task, a chance to redeem herself, and she was not about to let Alexander down.

“Psst,” whispered Maurice, his hand shielding his mouth from the others as if that would prevent them from hearing him. “Let’s do a deal, young lady.”

She shuddered. She had been offered a deal before, by Agent Crow on the morning of her wedding. Tell me where your family are, and I’ll let you and your mother go free. And Vincent. And I’ll leave Philip alone, too. Well that deal hadn’t gone very well for her at all. And she had no reason to trust this man any more than she had trusted Crow. This man was the King of the Outsiders, according to Georgia. He had let his men shoot KING. She could barely look at him, yet alone talk to him.

“Be quiet,” she instructed him. “Or I’ll rip your wrinkly little head off.”

“No you won’t. You’re Matilda aren’t you?”

She stared at him in surprise.

“How do you know my name?”

“Those people who freed you when you were in that cage. Georgia, young Keith, the fat boy. They were working for me, you know. I paid them to let you go free.”

“Is that the truth?”

“Kings never lie,” Maurice assured her. He smiled at her. It made him look a little creepy.

One of the Neanderthals started to stagger. He had never drunk beer before, and it was taking effect already. He clutched on to the bar for support. His companion came to check that he was okay, swaying from side to side himself.

“Are you all right?”

“Dehydration,” explained the first Neanderthal. Pass me another one of those bottles.” They giggled like small children, and resumed drinking.

Maurice paused until he was sure that the others were back to their drinking game, and then went back to work on Matilda. He had been trained for this when he was at the NEA. He knew what buttons to push; it was just a case of pushing as many of them as possible in the time available, and in the right order. She was bound to cave in to him in the end. Neanderthals were pliable, if you knew how to work them.

“You’re not like them,” he crooned. “Look at them, playing like little children; well, great big children, I suppose. But you’re different. You have compassion, poise, intelligence. I bet you never fitted in when you were at home, did you?”

She shook her head.

“You always felt different? More like us than them?”

“Nanny was an Outsider.”

“There you go, then.”

How did he know these things about her? But what did it matter? She had trusted Outsiders before, and all it had got her was grief, bereavement and ten years of painful banishment. She could not listen to this man. It would end in tears. It always did for her.

“I bet your nanny was very beautiful.”

She nodded again. One of the young Neanderthals – Clive – toppled over, and landed on her. She pushed him away in irritation. She wanted to talk about Nanny.

“And wise? And kind?”

“She was,” whimpered Matilda, feeling the tears well up in her eyes. “Daddy killed her. I wish she was still here. She’d know what to do about all of this.”

“I know another lady just like that. Would you like to meet her?”

“Another lady like Nanny? Yes. More than anything.”

“Let me go, and I’ll bring her to you. She’ll look after you.”

She shook her head, hardening against him. This was a trick. Alexander’s instructions were her only certainty. Alexander had told her to keep Maurice here, and whatever else happened she would do as he had told her. He was her only hope of salvation.

“They’re all going to die, you know that? Even the big one you’re so fond of.”

She blushed. “What big one?” she asked, implausibly puzzled. He smiled at her, and winked. She blushed some more.

“You wouldn’t want anything to happen to him, would you?”

“It won’t. He’s strong. Outsiders are too weak to hurt him.”

Maurice chuckled, which annoyed him. She cuffed him round his elderly head to teach him some respect. “Stop it!” she told him. “Alexander is strong!”

“Do you know how many Outsiders there are out there?” he asked.

“Thousands,” she replied. She had heard KING and Alexander say that there might be thousands of them, so it must be true, however many that might be.

“About sixty or seventy million,” he told her. “Just in this country. And if you killed all of them, then there are others over the sea, several billion of them, who would take their place.”

She shrugged. These were not numbers she understood. She did not really understand thousands, but she didn’t want to be ignorant, not after he had said how intelligent she was.

“Do you know what a billion is?”

She shrugged evasively, hoping he would change the subject. He was making her feel stupid.

“It’s like the number of grains of sand on the beach out there.”

“Sand?”

He groped for some other way of conveying to her the numbers he was talking about. “Do you know how many words you’ve spoken since you were born?”

She laughed. What a stupid question. If this was the King of the Outsiders, the very best they had to offer, then maybe they weren’t as clever as everyone seemed to think they were.

“And how many words all your family have spoken. And all the words all their ancestors have ever said?”

“Of course not,” she replied. “There are too many to count.”

He looked at her, his eyebrows raised, waiting for the realisation of the size of her task to fully sink in.

“No,” she said. “There can’t be that many Outsiders. Their houses are too small to fit that many in.”

“And they have guns like you wouldn’t imagine. Not like the ones they used to shoot your friend tonight. Great big ones, which can kill all of you in one go. Guns on tanks, and guns on ships and guns on planes.”

Matilda started panicking. “Why didn’t you say this before? Why didn’t you tell Alexander?”

“I don’t trust any of the others, only you. They don’t have beautiful nannies, like you. But I can still save them though. Let me go. Let me speak to my...subjects. I will keep you all safe, you have my word on it. Kings don’t lie, remember.”

She wavered. He was a king, he must be telling the truth. But then she remembered Crow on the morning of her



wedding. He had promised her safety, not just for her but for Mummy and Vincent, too. And within hours, he had shot them both. Whatever they said, Outsiders could not be trusted. He would betray them all.

“You’re staying here.”

“Please,” Maurice begged.

“No.”

And then the two young Neanderthals collapsed into an unconscious heap on the floor. Matilda turned, trying to drag them back up into a standing position. Maurice was off, running towards the glass doors as fast as his spindly little legs could carry him.

Matilda set off in pursuit. She caught him as he was trying to push the heavy double doors open. Grabbing him by the neck, she sent him cart-wheeling back into the room, leaving him sprawled face down across a circular wooden table. She descended on him, anger erupting in her, wanting to tear his head from his leathery neck. She stopped in her tracks. She had never felt this way before. This was her Family side, finally coming out in her. She felt guilty; this was not the way Nanny would have wanted her to behave. But at the same time, she felt elated. Alexander would be proud of her. She was finally acting as she should be. She was finally Family at last, and deep down it felt very good indeed.

She flipped Maurice over. He grabbed hold of his chest with both hands, as if to stop something oozing out of him.

His face was contorted with pain. He started making funny little strangulated noises.

“Heart,” he gasped. “Heart.”

Something was horribly wrong here. She looked over towards the young trolls for help, but they were still out of sight, unconscious behind the bar. She turned back to Crow. He was gasping for breath. She grabbed hold of his shoulders and shook him in desperation. He had the look of death about him, but he couldn’t die. Alexander was depending on her. How could she tell their new KING that their hostage was dead? How could she tell him that she had killed him?

With one last defiant gurgle, he stopped moving. She gave him an experimental nudge, but he remained still. She shouted at him, without effect. She picked him up and shook him for all she was worth, but that didn’t work either. Nothing. He was very dead indeed.

With a heavy heart, and without another thought for the unconscious Neanderthals behind the bar, she set off in search of Alexander. She hated the thought of having to tell him about the millions and billions of Outsiders with big guns on “tunks” (or whatever the word Maurice had used). But worse even than that, she dreaded having to tell him that she had let him down. King Maurice was dead, and with him their last hope of survival had gone. And, as usual, it was all her fault.

#

Georgia was flagged down by a police officer in riot gear. Behind him, a row of similarly dressed officers stretched across the road, flanked by the sea-wall on one side, and the road by the railway station on the other. Several of them had dogs, and all had shields. A coast-guard helicopter darted around overhead.

She got out of the car, with Keith walking obediently to heel behind her.

“You have to let me through,” she said.

“There’s no-one coming through here today. There’s been an incident.”

She screeched in frustration, desperate to find Matilda but not knowing how to get through the road-block. Keith started getting agitated, picking up on her distress. She put a hand out to restrain him. There were too many of them to risk setting him loose.

The officer regarded him with suspicion. “Has this young man been drinking?”

She heard a vehicle pull up behind her. A truck, khaki with a canvas top. Soldiers started to file out of it, each with a machine gun. The cavalry had arrived, and they did not look as if they were inclined to take any prisoners. There was going to be a blood-bath. She had to do something to save the trolls; time was running out for them.

“Please,” Georgia begged the police-man. “Please let me through.”

“Move on. Now. I won’t ask you again.”

She thought of flashing her chest at him – it had always seemed to work in the past – but she had neither the energy nor the inclination this time round. She was also a little worried about what effect it might have upon Keith, who had had nothing but Elsie for female company for the last decade. Best not to risk it. She took him by the arm, and led him grumbling back to the car.

After strapping him safely in, she jumped into the driver’s seat, turned the key, and jammed her right foot to the floor. The car shot forwards, scattering the police officers in all directions. She thought she heard a shot behind her, from the direction of the army truck, but may have imagined it as it was difficult to hear much over the scream of a fast-moving car in first gear.

She screeched along the sea-front, and came to a halt by the clock-tower. She jumped out of the car, unbelted Keith (who was starting to panic that he couldn’t get out) and looked around for inspiration. Where to start?

And then she caught sight of Matilda, running up the hill with the sea to her left. Seizing Keith by the hand, she set off in pursuit. Quite what she intended to do when she caught her, she hadn’t yet worked out. But she had to do something. She couldn’t sit idly by and watch mankind’s nearest relatives become extinct before her very eyes.

#

The Neanderthals had started to file their way out of the shops in the High Street, there being no-one left alive inside to terrorise. One of them emerged with a book about human evolution tucked under her arm. She could not read, but had taken rather a shine to the reconstruction of the pre-historic Neanderthal face which graced the front cover. It reminded her a little of her Daddy.

The Princess of Wales' Royal Regiment were lying in wait for them at the top of the High Street, cordoning off the potential escape route, kettling them into the zone which had been designated for battle. There was a burst of machine gun fire, and all the Neanderthals collapsed to the ground, one of them still clutching her precious book as she fell.

More Family came out of the shops, cautiously this time, but with the same result.

The soldiers starting filing into the shops at the top end of the street, clearing them one by one. Every so often, five or six "trolls" would burst out of "Boots" chemist, and charge up the road towards them, but they never made it further than twenty yards or so before they were scythed down.

A handful turned and fled – mostly mothers with children – but most of them kept counter-attacking, a few at a time, with the same predictable outcome. The charges became less and less frequent, though, as they were efficiently dispatched, one convenient group at a time.

However hard they fought, the battle had been lost already.

#

Half a mile away, Alexander heard the machine guns. He faltered, if only for a second. He had never heard a noise like this before, but knew it was not good. He sensed that this was the beginning of the end. Unless something remarkable happened here, they would all be dead within the hour. Unless they fought like they had never fought before, his people would shortly cease to exist. No, he thought. I cannot allow that to happen; not on my watch. He had to think what KING would have done. He had to make his father proud of him.

His hopes of a miracle took a nose-dive when he stalked into a shop on the sea-front, to find his cousins (Ralph and Kevin) prancing around the clothes racks with pairs of crotchless knickers on their heads. Deirdre was behind the counter, crouched over a recently deceased shop-assistant. Having found to her frustration that she was unable to fit into either the sexy stewardess' costume or the slutty nurse outfit, she had stripped the shop-girl bare and was endeavouring to dress her up like a doll (albeit one with a very unusual and risqué sense of fashion).

Ralph squealed with delight as he discovered that the penis-shaped model he had found on a shelf made whirring noises when he pressed the button, and the tip rotated in suggestive circles. As Alexander looked on, unnoticed in all the excitement, Ralph prodded Deirdre in the bottom with his new toy. Her squeal was, if anything, even more delighted than his had been. She tried to use the shop-girl as a shield to protect her from Ralph's playful thrusts, but without success. As the two of them collapsed into helpless giggles, Kevin had a coughing fit. They turned, happy to include him in the game, and it was then that they noticed Alexander, their new KING. He was not remotely happy. Ralph hid the vibrator guiltily behind his back, giving their leader a sheepish smile in a desperate attempt to diffuse the situation, which unfortunately for him did not even come close to working.

Alexander leapt over the counter, and pinned Ralph to the wall. He was momentarily distracted as another of his subjects stumbled into the shop, a "kiss-me-quick" hat displayed proudly on her head. Kevin sniggered, but then thought better of it. Their new KING didn't look as if he would see the funny side.

"What are you doing?" Alexander shouted into Ralph's face, their noses just an inch or two apart. "Our people are getting killed out there, and you're in here playing dressing up games!"

“I wasn’t dressing up!” protested Ralph. “I was just poking Deirdre in the bottom with that funny whirry thing with the spinny end.”

He moved his right index finger round in circles to illustrate the point. He tried giving KING his very most winning smile, which failed as dismally as his sheepish one had done. For a moment, he thought that Alexander was going to rip his head off, ingratiating grin and all.

It was then that Matilda walked in. Kevin sneered; after what she had done to her family, she was the last person they wanted to see right now (or indeed ever). Alexander released Ralph, and seized Kevin instead.

“If you ever look at her like that again, I will personally tear your throat out. She’s worth ten of you.”

“Alexander. There’s something I’ve got to tell you,” Matilda squirmed.

“While you three are playing games in here, she’s been out there helping the cause. Guarding the hostage. If it wasn’t for her, our cause would be lost already.”

“Alexander,” Matilda pleaded miserably. “Can we talk? Just the two of us?”

“If only you were more like her. She’d never let me down like this.”

“I think I’ve killed King Maurice,” she burst out, unable to contain herself any longer whilst Alexander heaped undeserved praise on her. The more he built her up, the worse it was going to be for her when she came tumbling



back down again. “Accidentally killed him. I didn’t mean to, it just sort of happened, after I threw him on to a table.”

Alexander stared at her. He released Kevin. He hung his head. He looked defeated. That was worse even than his anger, his disgust. They had to win today, whatever else happened. She wanted him to tell her that Maurice’s demise was unfortunate, but wouldn’t make that big a difference. She had already been responsible for the deaths of her immediate Family; she couldn’t bear it if she had just inadvertently signed the death warrants of her entire race.

He looked up. He tried to look her in the eye, but couldn’t bring himself to do it. She writhed in guilty embarrassment. He walked out without a word, and loped away.

Georgia burst into the room, a hairy Outsider at her heel.

“Run!” she screamed at them. “They’re coming! You’ve got to get out of here now, or they’ll shoot you all!”

“Kf,” cried the hairy Outsider in agreement. “Kf!”

#

The soldiers poured into the town centre from all directions, the staccato stutter of machine gun fire interspersed with the screams and curses of dozens of panicking Neanderthals as they were driven back in upon themselves. A helicopter cut back and forth overhead, hovering wherever there was significant resistance, a short

burst of machine-gun fire breaking the deadlock each time with clinical efficiency. The Neanderthals howled at it in frustration, and threw whatever missiles they could find, but it was comfortably out of range. All they could do was run or die.

Alexander attempted to rally his troops, but it was a hopeless task. The Outsiders were mowing them down at an unsustainable rate. Burning with rage and shame, he called the retreat, and herded what remained of his people along the seafront, turning left just before the big sharp-angled building in front of them, past the little white building with its own little clock tower, and then on to the concrete pier, surrounded on both sides by the choppy grey sea.

Fishing boats bobbed in the waves to their left. Heavy stones formed a small wall (just a step or so high) along the pier-edge. Following Alexander's lead, they pulled up the stones, lobbing them towards the boats in an effort to sink them, but even they were out of range. Nothing was going in their favour today.

Others turned on the cars lined up against the sea-wall to their right, with significantly greater success. At first, they contented themselves with tearing them to indiscriminate pieces, but, under Alexander's direction, they changed tactic, cajoling the vehicles across the pier to form a barricade.

For a minute or two, they made a stand there, pelting the advancing soldiers with whatever debris they were able to

tear from the cars; wing-mirrors, bonnets, even a door or two. But then the helicopter was raking them with machine gun from above. One of the cars burst into furnace-yellow flame, and they were on the retreat again, back towards the cafes and bars at the far end of the pier, in a desperate search for sanctuary.

Matilda scurried along after Alexander. This was all her fault. She had killed King Maurice. She was not sure how – maybe she had scared him to death? – but even though it was an accident she was still very much to blame. If Maurice had been alive, the soldiers would never have shot at them. They could have bargained with them; let us all go, and we will give you back your king. But there was no hope of a bargain now, not after what she had done. All Family would die because of her.

Had she asked him, she would have been surprised to discover that Alexander was not blaming her right now. He was blaming himself. His father had been a great leader, marshalling his people through terrible times. Had KING been here, he would have known what to do. He would not have entrusted Maurice to Matilda, he would not have allowed anyone to prance around in shops with Outsiders' tiny little pants on their heads, and there was no way in the world he would have called the retreat, however bad things had become. He would have stood his ground, and he would have fought back, and he'd have won. He'd always won, until last night. And even the fact that KING was dead was down to him. He could have moved more

quickly, shielded his father from the bullets that had slowly sucked the life from him in the back of the van. But just for a second, he had been frightened, had held back at the sound of gunfire, and that second had been all that it took to wrench his father away from him. But for him, his father would still be here to lead them; but for him, his people would be running riot rather than running away.

He came to a halt. They were outside a one-storey brick building, a handful of blue picnic tables lined up outside it. Kevin seized one of the tables and hurled it at the soldiers who had breached the wall of flaming vehicles, the savagery in his face undermined to a large extent by the crotchless knickers which were still keeping one of his ears warm. Others were in the cafe, in search of any Outsiders who might be hiding inside, whilst the rest of them continued to pull up the stones in a hopeless attempt at bombarding the fishing boats which remained stubbornly out of range.

Matilda was at his side, such pain in her eyes, tugging at his sleeve, urging him to keep on moving. But where to? They were running out of pier. When they reached the end, there would be nowhere left to go. They would be butchered where they stood, an inglorious end to a proud and noble race. He had to do something, however low the prospects of success.

He started walking back towards the soldiers, his arms raised above his head in a sign of truce. Matilda tried frantically to haul him backwards, pleading with him to

flee, but he shrugged her off. She bent down, picked something off the ground, and hurried after him, still begging him to turn tail and run. He ignored her. The time for running was over.

A soldier raised his rifle, pointing it straight at him. He carried on walking; he was not about to be intimidated by a tiny little man like that. This was his last chance of saving the twenty or thirty survivors from the three hundred or so he had led out of the caves this morning. He had to keep walking, come what may.

Matilda tried to move in front of him, to shield him from the bullets meant for him. He shoved her viciously aside. "You're shaming me!" he spat at her. "Go back to the others." She wilted, but stayed beside him.

An Outsider flashed a card at the soldier, said something in his ear. The soldier reluctantly lowered his rifle, and backed off a few wary steps. The man walked forwards. He reminded Matilda of Crow, though he was much younger, he had that same air about him, a mongrel mix of insolence and authority.

The man held out a hand to him. "Bishop," he said. Alexander slapped it away.

"We have a custom," he told the agent, getting straight down to business. "When we take Outsiders as Wedding Feasts," they usually die in one of two ways. They cry, or they shrivel into themselves and say nothing at all. But sometimes, just sometimes, they fight. And our custom is, if they win, we let them go free. Only one has ever won.

Matilda's grandmother. But the custom is there all the same."

"And?" asked Bishop.

"I'm offering you the same deal. We fight, just you and me. If I win, you let us all go. If you win, you get to kill us all."

"We're killing you all already. What would we get out of that?"

"Your honour."

"We're not too fussed about that, to be honest."

Matilda pulled at his arm again. He ignored her.

"Everyone is "fussed" about their honour. Everyone."

"You should know your enemy better. I'm not going to fight you. But I have a deal of my own to propose."

Alexander nodded for him to proceed. Maybe this Bishop was their new king, now that Maurice was dead. Only kings made deals. Maybe there was still hope for those Family who were left, even if they were so pitifully few. He would do whatever it took to save them. Whatever it took.

"Give yourself up. Come with me now, you and your friend here, and we'll let the rest of you go."

He considered the suggestion for a second or two. He gave a further nod. He was ready to sacrifice himself if it meant the others would go free. He felt sure that Matilda would understand, that she would give herself up too, for the good of their people. This was her chance of atonement, And his, too.

“Don’t trust him,” hissed Matilda.

Alexander turned to face her. “I know you’re scared,” he told her, “but we have to do this. Be brave. To save the others.”

“I’m not scared,” she snapped, hurt by the disapproval she detected in his voice. “He’s lying. Crow said the same thing to me to make me tell him where the House was, and then he killed them all, Mummy and Vincent included.”

“We have to give ourselves up,” he urged her. “What choice do we have?”

“They’ll put you in a cage. They’ll beat you, and they’ll hurt you, and they’ll kill everyone else in the meantime.”

“I won’t let them hurt you.”

“I’m not worried about me,” she shouted at him. “It’s you; don’t you understand that? You’re KING now. I can’t let them treat you like that. I won’t let them humiliate you.”

“It’s all right to be frightened,” he said. She screamed in his face in frustration. Why wouldn’t he listen to her? She was trying to save him from the loss of his dignity, a fate worse than death for him, and he was convinced that she was just trying to save her own skin, a skin which she really didn’t consider to be worth saving.

Bishop gestured for Alexander to follow him. The soldiers parted, opening a path through the ranks.

“No!” shouted Matilda. “Don’t go!”

Alexander gave her a smile so sad it nearly broke her. “I can’t let them all die. I want to go out fighting; it’s what

KING would have done. But how can I, when it means that they all die with me?"

"They'll all die anyway!" she yelled at him, panic building up inside her. "Why won't you believe me?"

"Time to go," said Bishop. "Or the deal's off."

Alexander nodded. He stood there, head bowed, as they struggled to find handcuffs big enough to go over his wrists. Matilda looked back towards the cafe, where a couple of dozen Family looked on in stunned silence. The only sound was from the helicopter which hovered expectantly above them.

Eventually, they cuffed him, and were ready to lead him off. He gave one last half-smile to Matilda. "Join me," he said. "Please." And then they were taking him away.

She looked at Bishop. He was looking towards one of the Outsiders, a soldier with a gun. The two exchanged a wink. The man gave a command, and the other soldiers raised their guns. They had not even waited until Alexander was out of sight before breaking their promise to him. Did they have no honour at all?

She saw the expression on Alexander's face change. Resignation turned to fury, as realisation dawned upon him that he had been tricked. He had been willing to give up his life for his people, but had got nothing in return but lies. Why hadn't he listened to her? She had known this would happen; they were never, ever to be trusted.

Alexander broke free, lashing out at the men surrounding him, hammering at their heads with his handcuffed fists.



Matilda fought her way through to him, but it was too late. He was shot at point blank range, two or three shots to the torso which would have ripped anyone else in two. He dropped to his hands and knees, fighting for breath. Someone stuck the muzzle of his gun against his forehead, ready to finish the job, but Bishop pushed it sharply away.

“No. I want two of them alive. One of each. Take him away.”

And then Matilda was by his side. He looked up at her. Their eyes met. She held his glance, only for a second but that was all it took. She knew what she had to do. There would be no more compromise with these creatures, no more surrender. They would not cage Alexander like an animal, run their tests on him, strip away his dignity and his pride. He was their KING, and he would die as such. She raised the rock high above her head, and brought it crashing down on his skull. She felt the force of the blow vibrate through her arm, heard the crunch of splintering bone. She had his blood all over her clothes, his brains clotting between her fingers like plaque between teeth.

She smiled a dreadful, haunted smile, and made her way slowly back towards the handful of Family still standing. There were so few of them left, so very few. Some juvenile males, a few elderly females, a mother clutching her baby to her chest. None of them were fit to lead them now that Alexander was gone. They turned tail and fled, all resolve vanishing with the demise of their KING. No-one made it more than a few yards before they were taken down by

fire-power that none of them could even have comprehended before today.

All guns turned on Matilda, the sole survivor. Bishop fretted, demanding that they take her alive. But the soldiers were jumpy, ready to shred her with bullets if she put any one of them in danger. Only her proximity to them saved her. They could not fire, without mowing each other down too.

And then Keith was amongst them, all teeth and grubby finger-nails, sending them scattering in all directions under the ferocity of this unexpected attack from behind. And Georgia was there too, setting upon any of them who stood up to her scary friend in the ladies' fur coat, screaming at them to leave him be, lashing around her like a kick-boxer on steroids.

Matilda walked away. A few minutes before, she would have joined in, trying to wipe out as many of them as she could before they despatched her. But not now. Alexander was dead. There was no Family left. There was no point in fighting when the battle was lost already.

She reached the end of the pier. There were a dozen or so steps leading up to the base of a small lighthouse, metal railings running up the side. She climbed the steps as if in a dream. She heard a shot ring out, a barely human howl, and then Georgia crying, shouting insults at anyone who would listen. Keith's misery was at an end.

Soldiers appeared at the top of the steps, rifles at the ready. She turned round. They were at the bottom of the

steps, too. She was trapped between them. It made no difference. It was all over now.

Bishop was down there, calling on her to give herself up, to come quietly, but his voice held no conviction. He knew what choice she would make, what choice she had made already. She shook her head and waited. She was the last of her people. It was too much for her to bear alone.

She had always been told that the Afterlife was a big meadow, full of your favourite people. Mummy would be there, and her darling brother, Vincent, whom she missed so much. Philip, as well, though it worried her that she could no longer remember what he looked like. She wasn't totally convinced that she would want him hanging round anyway if Alexander was there for her, too. You can't have two Beloveds, not even in the Afterlife, and she wanted Alexander to be her Beloved more than anything. If only he could forgive her for doing this to him; to everyone. If only he could love her, if such a thing was possible.

This world was cold, and it was bleak, and it was lonely. She was ready. It was time to go.

She saw Georgia break through a throng of soldiers, shouting something up at her; she wasn't sure what, as her voice was unintelligible through all the hysterical tears. She smiled at her, to tell her that everything was as it should be, that there was no need for her to worry any more. She would soon be at peace.

A dozen trigger-fingers squeezed. A moment of pain, white-hot and all-consuming, her whole body going into sharp spasm. But then there was grass. And then there was meadow. Was that a man she could see there? Philip? Alexander, if she was really lucky. It was the wrong shape to be Daddy, that was the main thing.

She felt someone take her hand, her old hand from her old life. Someone was weeping over what she had used to be, Georgia maybe? But there was no time to open her eyes to see who it was. She had things to do.

With a girlish giggle, she romped into the meadow to see who was waiting for her there.

#