

Resvrgam

A Novella by

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Chapter 1

What a vulgar party. It was only 9pm, yet Vivienne was already hot, sweaty and ready to leave these folks to their orgy of mutual self-congratulation. She fished a bottle of water from her shoulder bag and took a long, delicious swig. She bit at her nails and thought about the article. The article. She'd been here an hour and her notepad remained virgin white. So she hovered, trying to celeb-spot and wait for a glimpse of Anton Petrowski, the billionaire philanthropist host, but he was nowhere to be seen.

She'd kept reassuring herself that writing the vacuous *London Living* column would be good for her, show that after twenty years on the science brief she had more than one string to her bow. But bloody hell, this was no place for a Yorkshirewoman.

A penguin approached, effortlessly balancing a tray of brimming champagne flutes, silently proffering it in her direction. Unlike the guests, the penguin was thoroughly unremarkable. *No, thank you*, she wanted to say. *I'm like you; I'm not one of them*. But the relentless heat sapped her will. She took one, half-smiling, and threw it down her throat. If anything it made her even warmer. She wiped a sleeve across her brow; it came back smeared with salt, and she made a face at spoiling her blouse. Just another way she stuck out among the millionaires, models and powerbrokers fawning over each other. She fished out her notepad and pen and tried to write something, but wished she was in a lab somewhere, writing about advanced robotics, or tectonic plate structure, or even bloody consumer tech, or...

“Is anything the matter, Miss?”

A hot flush came upon her, and she caught her breath. Turning, she saw a funny-looking sort of man beside her. Viv didn’t even realize he had his hand upon her arm until she looked down to see it. The man’s face was hard, tanned, framed by jet-black cropped hair. His shirt, neatly tailored, was fire engine red, with orange cuffs and collar, and hundreds of tiny orange and yellow triangles sewn into the material. Viv couldn’t help but smile – when you’re that wealthy, you could afford to make your eccentricity bespoke.

“Nothing,” she said. “It’s a little hot in here, don’t you think?”

The man pushed his bottom lip out and shook his head. “Helps things flow, I always think.” His voice was unfathomably quiet, almost a whisper, and yet it seemed to be audible above the party raucousness, as though his words weren’t being poured into her ears, but into her heart. She tensed a little. These people probably had ways of seeming seductive, of softening the edges of their ruthlessness.

“I’m afraid I’ve never liked it too hot.” She smiled nervously, and pulled her arm away, tucking it under the other one. He didn’t look slighted by the retreat, and smiled again with aquiline eyes.

“Tell me,” he said, tapping his bottom lip with his freed finger, “I don’t recall you being here before. You seem a little uncomfortable.”

Viv rolled her eyes and looked into her champagne, before looking back into those dark eyes again. “Is it that obvious? Sorry. This really isn’t my scene, but I’m covering for my colleague, Eithné Fairbanks, from the Evening Chronicle.”

“Ah, yes, Eithné! Where is she?”

"She has a fever, been off for a few days now."

"Well, I'm sorry to hear that. I'm sure she'll return fresher than ever. So you're her colleague, yes?"

"Yes, I said I'd cover the column. Could be good for me to see a few different things."

"I couldn't agree more," he said with exaggerated sincerity.

"I normally do science and technology for the paper, so this is all a bit..." she sought for a word that wouldn't be too insulting, but he caught her out.

"Superficial?"

That made Viv wince. "Well, I wouldn't, ah, say that, um... just a bit different. But it's interesting."

"You may say what you mean in front of me." He gave her a warm smile, but the aquiline eyes remained hawkish, poised. "I promise I shan't be offended. I've heard it all before. And if it seems a little superficial," he leaned in close to her ear for a conspiratorial whisper, even quieter than his regular speaking voice. "That's because it probably is."

"Sorry. I didn't mean to be rude. I'm Viv." She extended her hand, which he gladly took and shook warmly. His shake made her skin prickle, but not with warning, something different.

"Ignatius Von Brandt."

"Oh, what a great name! Is it German?"

A smile flashed. "If you like, I could be your guide for the evening."

Viv looked him up and down once more. He was slightly shorter than her, even accounting for her heels, and he possessed a slight build, but he radiated...

radiated what? She wasn't sure, which discomfited her. Usually she had the measure of the scientists and engineers she spoke to; she knew what motivated them, how their brains worked. But this place was a whole different branch of science. What did these people want? The cynic in her might have thought *more wealth*, but that didn't sit right somehow. But the scientist in her told herself to embrace her curiosity, and proffered her arm. "Why not? Lead on."

He hooked her arm with a grin, and took them into the throng.

First he introduced Viv to a couple of impossibly glamorous types: a chiseled woman with agonizing-looking heels, long legs and an expressionless face who *mwa-mwad* Ignatius's face as he greeted her; a silvery gentleman with a walnut complexion and eyes half-closed by decades spent in the St Tropez sun, and others, all introduced with a hug, kiss, and words somehow both intimate and shallow. Perhaps everyone just got by in life by opening doors and slapping backs for each other? If so, there was something distasteful about it. Privately, she might have envied a life without the need for work, effort and innovation, but she checked herself. In real life you had to graft, like she had all her years. Moreso, she enjoyed graft. A twinge of silent pride made her walk a bit taller.

"These people are all very charming," said Viv, when Ignatius had led her away from the chatterers, "but what do they actually do? Are there any scientists here?"

"They're all very influential," said Ignatius, with no detectable note of irony. "Scientists tend not to venture too far from their own shores. I find them frustratingly closed-minded, to be honest."

“Right.” She’d heard a lot of put-downs about her chosen profession and colleagues over the years – boffins, geeks, weirdos – but never closed-minded. It really was an odd thing to say. “You haven’t said what you do, either. You seem to know pretty much everyone here.”

“I help them.” He flashed her that smile again.

A spark flashed in her heart again. Not attraction. He was sort of good-looking in a rakish way, but she didn’t feel any obvious compatibility between them. Besides, she couldn’t pick his age at all – he could have been a world-weary thirty-five, or a well-preserved sixty-five. No; the spark was curiosity. “You *help* them? That sounds a bit vague.”

He looked at her with certain inquisitiveness of his own, as if she were the curio. *Perhaps I am. I probably fascinate him, with these high street shoes and northern brogue.* She suddenly felt very self-conscious, and looked at her watch by way of excuse. “Oh, look at that, I need to go and jot down my article. Thanks for showing me around, Ignatius. You’ve been a gentleman. I should probably be on my way.”

Ignatius looked slighted. “If that’s what you wish.” He loosened his grip on her arm just a hint. “Did you study science yourself?”

“Yes. Chemistry.”

His eyes widened, and under the lights it looked as though they flashed slightly yellow. His hand hadn’t quite let go of her arm, and leant in once more. “Chemistry was always my favourite of all the sciences.”

Viv put her hand to her mouth to hide the smirk. He *was* charming, in a raffish kind of way, but she wasn’t buying such a cheesy line. “*You’re* a chemist?”

He rolled his eyes theatrically. "Well, I don't have the letters after my name, but I've got some experience in..." At the far end of the hall a swarm of cameras flashed, and the hubbub increased. "Ah, there's our man now."

Anton Petrowski walked into the room flanked by two blonde models: six-footers in gold minidresses and stilettos that probably cost more than her car. He was a sweating, balding walrus of a man, with a permagrin that sat between a grey, manicured moustache and a couple of wobbling chins. Despite his girth his eyes were bright and shining, and he moved with the energy of somebody half his weight and age, stopping to chat, hug, smile and dance with those he passed. He was led to a lectern where he talked about the charity he was supporting.

Ignatius smiled. "Well, it was lovely to meet you, Vivienne. If you need anything, I'd be delighted to assist."

As Ignatius turned to walk away, Viv surprised herself by placing a hand upon him. "Perhaps there is something. Do you know Mr Petrowski?"

"Well, I..."

"Do you think you could get me to speak with him?"

"I'm afraid he doesn't do interviews."

"So I've heard, but I need something to write about."

Ignatius half-laughed, but Viv jokily poked him in the arm. "I don't give in very easily, Mr von Brandt."

"Well, there's an attribute I admire very much. I'll let you into a secret." He leant in. "There are many people in this room very generous with their wealth. In return, they expect strict boundaries on their privacy. They aren't gaudy celebrities. Well," he grinned, "not *all* of them."

Viv couldn't help but smile herself. This Ignatius gave just enough impression that he was in on the joke. She decided he met with her approval.

"I'm sure you could write up this night with your eyes closed, Vivienne," he said, eyeing up her notepad. "So let me show you something you won't be able to write about."

~

Chapter 2

Viv and Ignatius slipped out just as the rich and fabulous were brandishing their chequebooks. It seemed typically ostentatious that they still actually used chequebooks. Ignatius remained tight-lipped as he led her away. Part of her thought he was simply using this as an awful ruse to steal a kiss – and maybe more – once they were away from the crowd, but he never even once looked at her with anything approaching desire – unless he thought that hawkish glint was some sort of weird come-to-bed look. If he did, he'd be disappointed. It might work on the airheads, but she'd brushed off more appealing men than this one in the past. When they got to the lifts, Ignatius hit the "Up" button. That surprised her.

"We're going up?" she asked. "What's up? The roof?"

"The penthouse."

Her interest piqued. "Petrowski's place?"

"Of course not. Why would he broadcast the location of his own home so brazenly?"

"So whose penthou..." Of course. His. "So you're the real host," she said.

"Won't they miss you at your own party?"

"I'm merely the spark to get things started. After that..." His hands imitated a puff of air.

"Just so you know, this sort of thing – the penthouse, the money – it doesn't impress me."

He pressed a hand upon his heart, feigning upset. "I'm hurt you consider that to be my motive. I can see there's more to you than that. But even so, there's no need to be so cool about it. There's nothing cool about being so cool."

And there's nothing cool about you, Viv might have said, but she kept her mouth shut. There might be a story here. Something to write down, submit to Emma on lifestyle and then retreat back to the cosy Science & Tech column.

Ambient lights gently lit the penthouse, while scents of cinnamon, anise and clove drifted through the large living space. It was a warm evening, but he hadn't bothered to open any of the windows, and she couldn't detect any air-con. Her blouse clung to her back like a needy lover. Ignatius walked up to the drinks cabinet by the hearth, with not a drop of sweat upon him or his clothes. The cabinet was an angular ebony oddity, its door made of obsidian so it looked like a giant black obelisk staining that corner of the room, and poured a suspiciously dark liquor into two triangular glasses.

"What's that?" Viv asked, taking a glass.

"Lubricant."

She eyed the glass and swirled the drink around it. The triangular shape prevented the drink from swirling around the edges properly. She drank from one of the corners. Warm, and aggressively spiced to the point of bitterness. Definitely not seductive. "So, why am I here, Ignatius?"

Ignatius poured himself the same drink, but almost three times as much, before drinking it in one long draught, as she might have done a glass of water. She felt her face twitch in revulsion at the macho show of hedonism, and placed the glass down a nearby coffee table, where the glass clinked satisfyingly.

"There," he said, pointing to the other side of the room. Her gaze followed his finger, and latched onto a triangular door inset into the wall.

"You've got a thing for triangles," she said. "What's that, some sort of subliminal suggestion of a threesome?"

Ignatius laughed heartily; a rich, deep, genuine laugh, which disarmed her and made her head swim. Another glass of the dark liquor floated over in his grasp, a glassy black pit framed by the orange flash of his cuff. It ended up in her hand, but this time she had little intention of drinking it; she held it as an accessory for now.

"Did you ever do research, Vivienne? When you studied chemistry?"

"A little, for my masters degree."

"And did you do research for research's sake, or for the reflected glory? For the story, in other words?"

She screwed her face up. Scientists always did it for the science. Didn't they? "For the research. For good science."

Ignatius smiled and opened the triangular door, inviting her in. She took a baby sip of the dark stuff – not enough to make her balk – and strode through. When inside, she found her breath taken away. The room was a pyramid, pointing up to the sky. Not just any pyramid – a perfect tetrahedron – no, not quite perfect. Weirdly, she noticed the apex of the room itself was missing, allowing a glimpse into the night sky above. Tiny triangles decorated each of the room's three walls, all pointing upwards, like a mass of the devout, reaching for the stars. The strange geometry of the place made her forget that she'd been gawking at it for probably a whole minute.

"Take a seat," said Ignatius, making her jump.

She gave him with a knowing smile, and perched on one of the two worn, leather pouffes either side of a small, dead firepit covered by a copper dish filled with ashes. “So is this your game, then? Lure unsuspecting female scientists back here and impress them with your Platonic solids?”

Viv smiled at her own wit, but Ignatius only looked into the firepit. He closed the door, leaving the only light in the room coming from the stars above. In the near blackness Viv’s heart beat a little faster, and a breeze wafting down from the open roof made the hairs on her arm stand to attention. Ignatius’s fresh leather soles clicked on the tiles, and the other pouffe gave a soft sigh as he sat on it. She silently fished into her bag for her notepad and pen, but gasped as the firepit burst into life, orange tongues suddenly reaching for the sky with a whoosh. Behind the crackling flames Ignatius’s teeth and eyes glowered. He delivered a wristy flourish over the flames, which *woofed* and turned green. Viv’s senses quickened again, and then she settled. Copper sulphate. She hadn’t seen it since secondary school, and had forgotten how impressively it burned.

“Ignatius, why am I here?”

“Does any part of you wish to be among the circle of people we just saw? See more than what you’ve seen?”

She paused, catching herself before she answered. She’d worked hard to break free from a relatively poor background to get through a good university and become a middling reporter at a national newspaper, and she still had her best years ahead of her. No mean feat. In fact it was bloody impressive. She’d invested her whole life in science, logic and investigation. So why did she find herself suddenly

captivated by a bit of chicanery? “Yes,” she couldn’t help saying. “Yes, I’d like to see more.”

“Why?”

The question hit her like a punch. She thought of the vacant millionaires a few floors below them, rattling on about nothing, and less. “Because I don’t understand your world. I don’t understand why you exist.” The liqueur must have been stronger than she thought. Her head was swimming, and she started to wobble.

“Steady yourself,” he said. A granite pestle and mortar was being cradled in his hands.

Where did that come from? She blinked a few times to gather her focus, and stared into the dancing fire. A flourish of Ignatius’s wrist swept the fire up in a *whoosh* of blue, bathing the room in a cooler heat. She preferred that light. Somewhere in the back of her mind a voice said *copper chloride*, but she hardly processed it. The blue flames died down to a steady flicker, and the rest of the room – the walls, the floor, the triangles, Ignatius, slowly dissolved into nothingness as the blue stroked the corners of her eyes, and images ghosted into view: the faces of the people downstairs, and then her own, elegiac and ecstatic all at once, bathed and dressed in blue and orange and black and white, surrounded by the people downstairs; she was wrapped in something. A face appeared at her shoulder – Ignatius’s – and his arms, wreathed in red, draped around her, pulling her down into a black soup, and her lips met his, until she was wet, and hot, and she felt it on her skin, sweaty, clammy, and hot, getting hotter, until her arms and face stung from the burn.

She pulled back from the fire and shook her head. Ignatius still stared at her, partly hidden by the fire and smoke, broken into an eye here, a half-mouth there, partial-creatures in the shadow.

“Tell me what you saw,” he said, his voice low and flat.

“I saw me, with...” *Not you.* “The people downstairs. What does that mean?”

He nodded in a grim sort of satisfaction, and started to slowly roll up his left sleeve. “Many people downstairs give more for the betterment of the lives of others than you know. They might seem like airheads or boneheads, but they understand structures, movements, even chaos. But it takes a great deal of sacrifice – time, effort, flesh, will – to understand such things. You’re a chemist – you understand what makes up the universe and everything in it.” He stopped, exposing his arm to the firelight, where his smooth skin shone, “you have to be prepared to give yourself up, freely and willingly.”

Her dulled senses meant it took a moment to register him peeling back a layer of skin, but when she did she screamed and jumped up from the pouffe, backing away from the fire. All too late she realized there was only one way out, and that was past *him*. He looked up at her, holding his haemorrhaging arm over the flame, where the blood was greedily consumed with a crackle and spit. “Don’t be alarmed,” he said, dropping the flap of skin into the mortar, where it wriggled and danced. Sweat coursed over her, stinging her eyes and slicking her hands, while her pulse thrummed erratically. She backed into the far corner of the room, where the sloped walls forced her into a submissive crouch. She forced herself not to look at the wriggling flap of skin.

“What the fuck is all this?” Her voice was shaking, which she hated. “Who the fuck are you?”

Before he could answer she started to move. Sobriety hadn’t hit her yet, but clarity did. The compulsion to leave the wrongness of that place overwhelmed her, and she pushed past Ignatius, who sat stock still on the leather pouffe, making no attempt to stop her. Out of the pointed room the soft light of the penthouse bathed her, and she didn’t look back.

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Chapter 3

Somewhere – in the building foyer, in the panicked walk along Fleet Street, on the tube train filled with the shit-workers, the crazed and the drunk, in the taxi home from her suburban station – she calmed down and tried to assess the evening more logically. She reckoned the dark liquor must have contained some mild hallucinogen as well as a generous slug of alcohol – diphenhydramine, perhaps, or even mushrooms. Even nutmeg concentrate might do the job.

It didn't make sleep any easier. She pulled the blanket up to her nose like armour and stared at the ceiling, thinking about what had happened. Humiliated at being suckered in by Ignatius's routine, her body shuddered and she curled herself into a ball. It obviously hadn't been his skin – it was a piece of material, a prop hidden up his sleeve. She scolded herself for being taken in by it so easily. That must be how those people operate: intimidate and blind the little people with pseudo science to elevate their own sense of mystique. And she – a journalist, a *science* journalist – had fallen for it. She just knew that somewhere Sir Karl Popper would be turning in his grave. She rolled onto her side and closed her eyes, but all she could see behind her eyelids was Ignatius's face in the flames, wrapping himself around her and pressing his hot lips onto her wet mouth, the both of them wrapped in the hiss of steam. Rolling onto her other side only brought the image of the wriggling flap of skin, and she scolded herself for being such a bloody girl over the whole thing. She'd dealt with far scarier people than this Ignatius charlatan in the past. Easier said

than done, though. Tomorrow she'd have to see her editor, and she'd written sod all.

The morning was easier than she predicted, and the events of the night before seemed more pleasingly distant, though the lack of column inches weighed heavy on her, much more so than Ignatius, and remained over her all the way to the office. She tried to fill in some of the gaps on the commute using her phone.

Rather than leave the empty column to fester, Viv walked briskly over to Emma Bartlett, the Chronicle's Lifestyle editor. Emma finished typing up an email before looking up at Viv over her fashionable reading spectacles and under a stylish red bob.

"How was last night? I suspect it was a bit of an education for you," Emma smiled, revealing a fetching gap-toothed mouth.

Viv half-smiled, but suspected it appeared as more of a grimace. "You could say that."

"What have you got?"

"Oh, bits and pieces." *Mainly cobbled together from social media updates on the train.* Time to change the direction. "But I think there's something there worth pursuing a bit more. There's a story in there."

Emma stared at her incredulously. "Viv, sweetie, I appreciate you filling in, but this isn't science. Really. There are no stories in Lifestyle. There are glimpses, snapshots, vignettes. A vicarious thrill for the rats on the tube. A fancy face with nothing going on behind it. If you want to do more columns, you'd better realize that sooner rather than later."

"Yes, but--"

"People don't want stories from Lifestyle. They want to peer through the keyhole. Don't give it all away by writing bloody *stories* about it, darling." Emma turned back to her computer and started to tap.

"Why not?"

"Didn't you hear what I said? There *are* no stories. What are you covering this week?"

"The Government's making an announcement on funding for intelligent systems in--"

"Sounds great. There's a fashion launch in Mayfair tomorrow night." Emma thrust a print out of two columns of names under Viv's nose. "Those are the A-listers; those are the B-listers. I'll email you the address and get you on the guest list. Write something up." Emma swung her chair round to look her up and down. She suspected the appraisal wouldn't be complimentary. "Do you really want to do this column, Viv, darling?"

"I want to interview Anton Petrowski."

Emma rolled her eyes. "Darling, he's a whale. Nobody wants to read about whales. If you want to write about him, try to find out who he's banging. And besides, he doesn't do interviews."

Time to go nuclear. "I think I can get an interview with him. I think I can get close to him."

Emma furrowed her brows. "Oh, *Vivienne*," she smirked, "What did you get up to last night? No, don't tell me. Oh, I love it! You science types are all such dark horses, aren't you? Look, sweetie, if you believe you can get an interview then by all

means go for it. I won't expect anything, because lots of people in the know have been trying for years. Send me your copy."

Right.

"Uh, Emma, have you ever met a man called Ignatius Von Brandt?"

Emma stuck out a bottom lip. "Yes, I've seen him before. But I've no interest in him. He's a hanger-on so far as I can see. I spoke to him once. I didn't think there was anything new there."

Viv tried not to let the oddness of that comment get to her. *Unless it's a lie.* Emma spun around and took a phone call that started, inexplicably, with that *mwa-mwa* kissing sound. As Viv turned, it wasn't the whale Petrowski on her mind. It was Ignatius Von Brandt. She wanted to put him in his place.

At lunchtime she took the tube over to the City and walked to Ignatius's apartment building. The lobby was large, spacious and tiled with mirrors, tall blooming potted plants and warm light. The concierge, a well dressed middle-aged man, looked up at her from his seat behind a large, marble desk and smiled graciously upon her approach.

"Good afternoon, madam," he said.

"Hello there. I wonder is Ignatius Von Brandt in today?"

The man creased his brows ever so slightly. "I'm sorry, which company does he work at?"

She stopped. "Oh, I'm not sure, but I don't think he works here. He owns the penthouse on the top floor."

"Um, the penthouse isn't owned by an individual, madam. It's owned by a private company. But people rent it out."

Viv's lips tensed at the revelation. *So he is a bloody fraud.* She clenched her fists and held back the need to vent her frustration at the poor concierge.

"Do you know who's renting the penthouse at the moment, or who had it last night?"

"I'm afraid I'm not at liberty to divulge that. They're usually quite private guests."

"Was it Mr Von Brandt?"

The man paused, just enough hesitation to give the game away, before responding rather more curtly. "I can't tell you, madam."

"Would you relay a message to whoever is renting the penthouse, please? Just a simple message. Tell them Vivienne apologises profusely for last night, and wants to know more. If they want to meet, I'll be here," she fished out the note Emma had given her and placed it on the reception desk, "tomorrow night, at 9pm. Tell them it'll be worth their while."

~

Insectoid models strutted along a makeshift runway under burning halogen lamps and throbbing dance music, which prevented Viv from getting too close. She had no clue about what made the clothes so special, but she was in private awe at the girls' – and boys' – ability to walk so stridently under such heat and noise without breaking the slightest bead of sweat. It might not have been the most noble of professions to dedicate one's life towards, but it had a certain hollow impressiveness to it. After the black liquor, Viv decided to stick to her trusty water-bottle this

evening. This time she did her best to hobnob and take notes and pictures. Emma – and Eithné – knew a lot of people, and mentioning them opened quite a few conversations. True, the conversations were meaningless but convivial enough, and soon Viv had a phone full of notes, snapshots, descriptions and names. More than enough for an airy article. It probably helped that she'd made more effort too. She'd splashed on the fake tan, treated herself to a cut and blow-dry, and had borrowed an expensive pair of heels – though she couldn't tell how expensive, and dared not guess – from a colleague.

She was in light conversation with an outré twentysomething Armenian designer named Magdaleña, when a voice whispered in her ear.

"You look positively at home tonight."

"So you got the message, then?" said Viv, not giving Ignatius the pleasure of eye-contact.

Ignatius flickered round to her front, light on his feet, taking a place next to the startled Magdaleña. His shirt looked identical in pattern and style to the one he'd had on the previous night, but this time the shirt was yellow, the triangles were orange, and the cuffs and collar were red. Otherwise he looked no different. He looked confused.

No, she remembered, he's feigning confusion. It's all an act.

"I received no message, Vivienne. On my word."

"Your word!" she spluttered with a laugh. "Magdaleña, allow me to introduce Ignatius Von Brandt, a rich braggart, liar, cheap magician, conman and all-round bloody bastard. And I'm not even sure about the rich part." That felt good. Show him up before he could prey upon this poor waif.

Ignatius looked at Magdaleña, shocked, who looked back at him with a laugh. Job done. Let him be the one who feels a fool.

“I’m sorry, is this a joke?” asked Magdaleña.

“No, it’s no joke, Magdaleña. Last night, he drugged me and tried to take advantage of me. The man’s a liar and a cheat.”

Magdanleña scrunched up her face and looked at Ignatius, as though she was appalled at him. Ignatius placed a hand on Magdaleña’s arm, and the other woman didn’t pull away. Viv sensed him trying to weedle his way back in; he probably couldn’t bear being outed, especially publicly, and *especially* by a woman.

“I’m sorry, Maggie,” he said, squeezing her arm and rubbing his thumb across her flesh. Although he addressed Magdaleña, he fixed his eyes squarely upon Viv. “Viv is new to all this.” He waved an arm around the room. “She’s a new initiate to our family.”

Maggie? Her shoulders tightened. Had she miscalculated? Or was Ignatius just using his showmanship to wriggle out of trouble? It amazed her just how much she started to doubt herself on the strength of just one whispered word.

Ignatius whispered into Magdaleña’s ear, never once moving his sparkling eyes away from Viv. Discomfort took her, and she wondered exactly what her plan had been? Who was she kidding? Borrowed heels and fake tan wouldn’t make her a part of this scene, any more than sticking a test tube in Ignatius’s immaculately-ironed breast pocket would make him Marie Curie. What a bloody fool she’d been. Again.

Magdaleña put a hand to her chest and broke out an open-mouthed smile, before taking Viv’s hand and holding it closely. She looked as though she was about

to burst with excitement. “My God, I’m so envious. The first times... the first times are the most exhilarating. When you become...” she closed her eyes and looked to the heavens, as if caught in the moment of some passing rapture. “When you become part of the whole. The moment of self sacrifice, the moment of giving yourself, and then-”

“Hush, Maggie,” said Ignatius, his hawkish face returning. “Don’t spoil it all. I have high hopes for Vivienne.”

Magdaleña clutched Viv’s arm tightly, and smiled deeply. “We will see each other again, when you are inside.”

Quickly after that Magdaleña was gone, accosted by a magnificent, smiling male model from Ethiopia whom Viv remembered was named Dereje, and who looked as though he’d been carved from stone. He also gave Ignatius a deep, warm smile and a hug with long, branch-like limbs, which Ignatius reciprocated, red cuffs climbing up the model’s back like tongues of flame.

“I was right,” Viv said, once they were alone again. “You are a conning bloody bastard. What was in the drink last night? Diphenhydramine?”

“I don’t know what that is,” came the whisper.

“Oh yeah? I thought you said you were a chemist?” She shook her head and tutted. “Such a bullshitter. Well, you might have her fooled, and all these other poor bastards, but not me. I know what you are, and I stand by what I said. After tonight you won’t see me again.”

“I see,” he said. “Why do you think these people are fooled by me?”

Typical Ignatius to pick on that part of the comment. More misdirection. But Viv played along this time. “Look at all this reverence, for *clothes*. Reverence for

literally something that covers us up, hides who we really are, what we're really like underneath. I might say that it's all just skin-deep, but even that's not true. It's just a shell. These people are hollow inside."

Ignatius nodded, as if he agreed. "I understand. But clothes offer protection, for both the wearer and the onlooker. They protect those who wish to hide their true identity, and protect those who do not have the strength to regard such identities. If you perceive a hollowness among these people, might that not be what the wearer wants you to perceive?" He looked at her, letting the question weigh heavy. To her great irritation she had no answer. "And besides, what's the harm in looking good? Do you think you have embellished your own identity with those nice high heels you're wearing tonight, or are you disguising it?"

Two minutes ago that question would have been the simplest thing to answer in the world, but now it shredded her. "What did Magdaleña mean, when she said she envied me? Why did you show me the flames? Why did you drug me? Why did you do that thing with your arm?"

He closed his eyes, as though pained, and pressed a thumb and middle finger against his temples. "Too many questions, Vivienne." He opened his eyes. "But I appreciate your curiosity. The fact you came back is a testament to that."

"I came back to show you up."

"I see," he said, a waspish smile slitting his mouth. "How did that turn out for you?" He waved the question away, as though annoyed at his own rudeness. "I did get your message from the concierge. He said you were quite tenacious. That touched me. If you would like the truth, about the drink, the fire, the arm, then I must ask something of you."

"I get it. You want me to give myself up," said Viv. "I don't know what that means, though. I don't want to be put in that situation again. It made me afraid." She looked down briefly. "You don't know how hard it is for someone like me to say that."

"You never told me what you saw in the flames."

Viv wondered why – and how – she was once again playing his game. She spoke softly. "I saw me, and other people from the party yesterday, and I saw you. You had your hands around me, and we were covered in steam."

"The flames aren't a crystal ball; they don't provide visions of the future, or anything like that. They merely show you a reflection of your own unconscious mind. Staring into the fire is like having a waking dream, gentle and distant, a finger pressing upon your hidden self and stimulating it. Come with me. Look into them once more."

Viv looked down. "I think you're wasting your time on me, Ignatius. I appreciate the attention..." *That's probably only half a lie.* "...but this really isn't for me."

"I disagree. If you give yourself up to me, I will give you Anton Petrowski. I'll show you him, and you will see him as no other person from the outside has."

He looked deadly serious. She was utterly flabbergasted, and the thought of him pursuing her so relentlessly confused the hell out of her. "Why me?"

"You fascinate me. I can't help it. Come with me, and I'll explain all."



Daniel Jones 28/9/2015 10:12

Comment [1]: There is quite a bit of telling in this; she was... She thought... She... Also I think there is a danger she may have changed her mind too quick about Ig

Chapter 4

“What is your instinctive reaction towards fire?” Ignatius asked when they were once more sitting in his tetrahedral fire room.

“Honestly, I want to put it out.”

“I know. Here, take this.” He passed her a glass of water. “You don’t have to drink it.”

She looked at the water suspiciously, before placing it by the leather pouffe at her feet. She remained utterly sober, and vowed to remain so. It was bloody ridiculous that she was back here, but if she got close to Anton Petrowski through putting up with the ridiculous charade again, it’d be worth it. She wanted to be back on the science brief more than anything, but she’d be damned if she did it on the back of a failure. She’d stick it out. “Forgive me if I don’t drink it.”

“Not at all.” He gave a wristy flourish, like an orchestra conductor, and the flames *woofed* up in a stretch of red and yellow, coals gleaming white at the base. He started to roll his sleeve up, slowly, methodically, and spoke as he did so.

“Everything in the universe is made of earth, air, fire or water.”

“The four elements. That’s not actually true. The-”

“But that’s actually only half the story,” he interrupted. “Only one of those elements lives in the farthest reaches of the universe, billions of light years beyond human understanding, in the past, and in the future. Are you a student of astrophysics, at all?”

"I have an amateur's interest," she said softly. "Space science is popular with the readers."

"As it ought to be. Tell me, where else do you encounter air in the universe?"

She made a face. "Air?"

He made an exaggerated inhalation through his nose. "Yes, air. There's a very real chance that this tiny speck of rock may be the only place in the universe with air as we know it. Oxygen, nitrogen, argon, carbon dioxide, helium, methane... air, for all its mundane, invisible ubiquity, might very well be unique. Air is a quirk, an accident. And yet, we all need it. Even me. Air is the spirit of man and woman, the conduit between life and death. But fire consumes it." Behind the flames his face glowered, a tigrish predator camouflaged against its natural habitat.

"Earth is more abundant, the flesh of life. Like a flap of skin writhing, seething, trying to take shape, earth is fecund, beautiful, the basis for all things. Earth is a mountain, and a tree, its branches reaching up to the sun and air, drinking it in. But beyond our own planet? Earth is abundant, yes, but lifeless. It may occur in the far reaches of existence on but only after death. In life, earth is malleable, but in death it is intransigent, a calcified remain, a rotting relic. And fire consumes it.

"Now, water," he said, eyeing her up with a grin. "Water exists as a gas, a vapour, a solid and as a liquid. It's a shapeless, formless thing, endlessly malleable, much more so than earth, never destroyed, never scattered, always changing, always flowing. Water is origin and destination: mountain spring and deepest ocean. Water cleanses: it washes away dirt, and filth, and sin, and to the life beneath that filth and sin water provides sustenance and the power to grow. Without water, earth would merely be dust. But beyond our horizons water is frozen, and inhospitable,

and solid, without its formless beauty. It is as dead and useless as the far-flung rock. But fire cannot consume water. Fire can only change its form.”

Viv felt her pulse quicken. Warmth coursed over her, through her. She looked at the glass of water by her feet. It quivered gently, vague ripples spreading out from the middle. She hadn’t seen anything in the flames this evening. Ignatius’s voice had been oddly on-edge. He’d finished rolling his sleeve up, and showed his arm to Viv. It looked just as she expected. “There’s no wound,” she whispered. “It was all a trick.”

“There was a wound.” A flick-knife appeared in his hand from somewhere. “But there was no trick.”

The hair on Viv’s skin raised up, stretching it taut, and she squirmed in her seat, ready to rise, but she held firm. Despite his hungry look she somehow doubted he meant her harm. So long as the fire remained between them, she felt safe enough. Ignatius tossed the knife over to her, where it landed at her feet with a thunk. He bared his forearm at her, inviting her. She shivered in cold realization.

“You want me to cut you?”

“No tricks.”

“I can’t do that.” She’d never been squeamish, but the thought of cutting someone made her bowels turn to water.

“Just the tiniest dot.”

She paused. The knife sat between her feet. She dared not touch it, fearing what might happen if she did. “I can’t.”

“The merest pinprick.”

She kicked the knife gently with her shoe. It didn’t do anything. *What did you expect it to do, explode?* She picked it up. It was heavier than it looked. The handle

was metal and leather, and the blade slightly curved. This was so bloody weird. “Just a pinprick.”

Ignatius stayed stock still, and she approached him cautiously. She became aware that he’d offered himself freely to her – his life in her hands. Is this what he wanted from her? A moment of complete subservience? Her grip on the knife handle tightened as she understood the position of power she was in. She pressed the blade against his arm, but didn’t break it the skin.

“The tiniest pinprick,” he whispered, no louder than a wisp of smoke.

She broke the skin. A tiny, warm maroon bloom erupted and trickled down his arm. She gasped and flinched as Ignatius’s free hand swooped around and gripped the hand wielding the knife. “Fire is the most ancient of the elements, exploding the universe into existence, and growing in every star that ever lived. Fire thunders and broils in every corner of existence, rolling, squirming, burning, aeon after aeon, heating, blackening, scorching. But, like water, fire also cleanses; it burns away the old, revealing the new flesh beneath. Like water, it’s shapeless, formless, but unlike water cannot be caught. Unlike water, fire does not give life. It *is* life. Fire has always been alive, and it always will be, in every corner of existence. By giving ourselves to the flames we become part of that immortality.”

She resisted the strong grip of his fingers but found she couldn’t move.

“Ignatius, please let go.”

He ignored her, guiding her hand with his, plunging the blade deeper into his arm, an inch into the flesh, then two, three. The gash was deep and wide. Dark blood poured out over his arm, her hands, and crackled as it dripped onto the flames. Ignatius yelped with the pain, finally letting go of her hand and clutching his wrist,

agony writing itself over his face. “Learn to become the fire,” he said through clenched teeth, and he thrust his wounded arm into the bottom of the flames, where it caught alight after a few seconds.

Viv cried out and stumbled back onto her backside. “What are you doing?” She felt instinctively for the glass of water, but in wildly reaching for it she knocked it over, and watched helplessly as it uselessly spread over the warm tiles.

The visible agony had left Ignatius. He stood, his right arm wreathed in flame like a torch, his eyes wide and black, two infernal pits, lost in time and space, staring into the fire dancing round his arm.

Viv scrambled to the leather pouffe and crouched behind it, her flesh crawling, but Ignatius did not advance upon her. It was as though he’d forgotten she was there. After some time had passed – a minute? Two? Ten? – Ignatius reached for a neatly-folded towel on the floor with his unburnt hand and wrapped it around the flame, the fire dying in a muffled yawn. Unpeeling the towel once the flames had died, he bared his arm again. Ashes and embers fluttered from his arm in wisps as he brushed it with the towel. When the last of the ashes had been swept from flesh to the firepit, Viv’s breath left her, and she grabbed his arm, inspecting it. The room was dark, to be sure, but there was no mistaking that the wound had gone, and the fire had left no trace; no scar, no slit, no blood. Just the grey smudge of ash.

“Do you want to write about something?”

Viv nodded her head, mouth agape, heart jackhammering.

“Don’t write about this,” he said, brushing off the last of the ash and rolling his sleeve back down. “Write about the good work we do. Write about the work we’ve always done.”

"Who's we? What work?"

"We've been here in London for centuries now. This city might be founded upon a river, but it's fire that gave it life and made it thrive. The mouths of dragons, eternally agape in the spew of conflagration, adorn the doorways and archways of schools, offices, liveries," he said, walking out of the triangle room and into the penthouse. She followed, quivering in the warmth radiating through the building. Even her sweat was warm. "The Great Fire burned down half the Square Mile, but it worked. And look at it now..." He stopped by the huge windows of his penthouse and panoramically swept his arm across the London skyline.

The room spun for a moment, and Viv had to grab a chair to stop herself falling. "What do you mean, it *worked*?"

Ignatius gave her a telling look. "It was well done. In more ways than one." He grinned, showing teeth. "That conflagration burned away the shit and Plague of the slums, and from the ashes the city rose up more powerful and beautiful than before. All impossible, without fire. *Resurgam*, Vivienne."

"What?"

"*I will arise*. After the Fire, Sir Christopher Wren asked for a piece of flat stone to use as a marker for the centre of the Great Dome of his new St Paul's Cathedral. The stone, found and given to Wren by a workman, miraculously bore a single word."

"Resurgam."

"Exactly. That stone now sits beneath the image of – what else? – the Phoenix, above the entrance of the Cathedral. The city will rise evermore, just as we do. Do you still think the Great Fire was accidental?"

She wanted to nod but her head was too heavy to lift, and her stomach wrenched. A thousand answers fought their way out, but all she managed was, “Bloody hell.”

He knelt beside her. “Moreover, do you think it was really miraculous that it happened to be *that* stone that was found? We don’t deal in miracles and coincidences.”

The shock climbed up her face like a snake. “You were the workman who gave Wren the stone? You knew Christopher Wren?”

He grimaced. “Vivienne, have you listened to nothing? It is in the shadows of other men and women where you’ll find us. The insignificant workman who passes a man a stone, the customer who distracts a baker when his pies are a-cooking.” He flourished a wrist. “*Resurgam*. When the House of Commons was destroyed by fire in 1834 they said it was incompetence. They said the same thing about Pudding Lane. People never learn.

“Before the Blitz, the Third Reich didn’t believe the aerial bombardment of London was the primary means to break the will of the British. But a word in their ear convinced them Reich otherwise. But in the white hot fires of the Luftwaffe’s incendiary bombs, London’s spirit of kinship – often so tepid and weak – was galvanized in a way impossible had the day-to-day apathy in the hearts of London’s people been allowed to fester. But in fire, London’s heart arose. *Resurgam*, Vivienne.” He knelt beside her. Faint crackling noises seemed to hang in the air, as if his skin still smouldered beneath his clothes. The nonsense of everything Ignatius had said frightened her more than she could have imagined. She looked away from his eyes and out of the penthouse glass doors, over the rooftops of London,

twinkling in the evenlight. Though hot, she shivered uncontrollably. The stars seemed to be moving just a little faster than they ought to have been. Was that a trick, too? For a second she understood the fleeting brevity of it. Bile rose in her stomach as she thought of the wound cleaned by fire. The gash hadn't been in his arm at all; it was a wound in her sense of self, slicing deep to the bone, each scrape along the nerve-endings telling her that everything she'd learned was *wrong, wrong, wrong*. Part of her railed at being suckered by his incredible tricks and well-rehearsed speeches, but increasing parts of her wanted to muffle the outrage, wanted to submit, wanted to feel the lick of fire on her flesh. She shocked herself, and a gulp caught in her throat.

"I know you find this hard to believe," he said. "But I want you – I *need* you to believe. And who are you going to believe? What you've been told all these years, or what your lyin' eyes are telling you right now?"

"This is all a trick," she whispered through shaking lips.

"You know it's not. *There are more things in heaven and earth....*"

"...than are dreamt of in your philosophy. Hamlet."

"Yes. All the rage when I saw it as a boy," he said, flashing that hawkish grin.

"But that was a long, long time ago."

She choked out a laugh, but a tear accompanied it. She almost said *it's all a trick*, as she'd done before, but the futility of repeating it seemed just as absurd as what she was seeing. Her defiance deflated. "Why me?"

"Because I know you. I know how you think; deep waters swirling beneath still tides. I know you want to put me out, because I'm not natural; you're the lake, and I'm the fire burning on your shore. I've seen you a hundred times over the years,

with a hundred different faces, and I'll never stop trying to be with you. You," he said, wandering over and cupping her chin gently and tracing the outline of her trembling face with a light forefinger. "You would complete us. And if we had control over all the universe's elements: earth, air, fire and water – we will control all of Heaven and Earth itself."

Viv shuddered. The image of the walrus Petrowski popped into her mind. "Petrowski. Is he really a philanthropist?"

"I've never know a more generous soul. His charity has enabled countless scientific breakthroughs, saved countless lives, protected those facing slaughter, and fed the hungry."

"I don't remember him doing any of those things," said Viv, pushing his hand away. Her own hand felt airy, as if the muscle and bone had evaporated.

Ignatius made a face. "Why would you? Apart from him doling out a few oversized cheques to homeless shelters, why would you see it?" He brought her face closer to his. His breath smelt of hot cinnamon and cloves. She closed her eyes so as not to face him. "He, as do we all, operate in the shadows cast by others. But we're there. And you should join us." He stepped back, smiling, beholding her with arms outstretched. "Vivienne. Water. Come join us. Give yourself to the fire. See the unseen."

Viv composed herself, but couldn't stop her hand from shaking. The image of his arm, slit down to the bone, wouldn't leave her. When it came her voice was wispy and weak. "I just can't believe it."

Ignatius sighed through his smile. "You still have doubts. I understand. You're a woman of faith. And science isn't wrong about these things; it just hasn't caught up. What will it take?"

"I don't know."

He turned away and waved a hand indifferently. "Then neither do I. I will find another."

As he was walking away the skin on her arms suddenly felt cold and goosepimpled. Shivering momentarily, she held a hand out to stop him. His shirt sleeve was hot, as though freshly ironed. "No," she said. "I want to know. What do we do next?"

"I'll see you around town, no doubt." Resting upon a recliner, he closed his eyes and interlocked his fingers over his stomach.

"When?"

"Some time."

"Aren't you afraid I'll write about any of this?"

Ignatius laughed behind closed eyes. "Be my guest. Though if you take that route, it will say more about you than it does about me."

~

Chapter 5

Viv hadn't smoked a cigarette since university, but tonight it seemed oddly appropriate. The craving must have been related to Ignatius's weird theatrics, which seemed less like magic and more like flamboyant chicanery the further she got from the penthouse, but doubts still gnawed at her. She caved near Southwark, buying a packet from a kiosk after a meandering walk. The first drag brought a spasmodic cough jolted from her chest when the hot, bitter smoke hit her lungs. The second went down easier, but by the end her head was spinning so ferociously she swore it could have been a joint – how strong were these bloody things? She tossed down the fag-end and stamped it out.

Once home she didn't smoke any more, but curiously didn't throw them away either. Instead, lying in bed and staring at the stars through the window, she sent a text message.

~

In the morning she took the tube to Holborn and sat down in a small Italian café off Southampton Row with a morning paper, a coffee and a cigarette. After a short while a gentleman with a kindly face and a thick, grey beard approached her table and threw his arms open wide.

She stood and accepted the embrace with a smile and a kiss on each cheek. His beard felt soft, reassuringly real. "Hi, Robert. Thanks so much for coming at such short notice. I hope this isn't putting you out."

"Not at all, it's lovely to see you," he said through a wiry smile. "I'm marking postgrad exams, so any excuse to get out of the office is welcome." Robert ordered a straight black coffee, folded his thick, hairy arms across his burly chest and screwed his brows into concern. "Though I've got to ask: why the urgency?"

Viv winced. "I wanted some advice."

He opened his arms, showing his boulder of a belly through a gaudy shirt, inviting the question. With his round features Viv always thought him a very huggable, dependable type of man, a rock in a crisis. All of which made the embarrassment already picking at her head more intense, telling her this was a mistake. The image of Ignatius's bleeding arm, open to the bone, assaulted her. Her jaw clamped in resolve, and she told Robert everything.

Nothing fazed Robert. He'd been a professor of biochemistry at King's College London for years now, and he listened to the whole story with little more than a polite smile, propped up by those log-like arms. After she'd finished, he called the waitress over and politely asked for another black coffee.

"Are you feeling alright, Viv?" he asked between sips of the drink when it came. "I must admit, it's a concerning story."

Viv's face crumpled. It had been hard to tell someone she respected as much as Robert such an outlandish story. "Concerning in what way?"

He looked incredulous. "I'm concerned for you, Viv. This Ignatius, he sounds a bit cultish if you ask me."

Viv rolled her eyes, aware how little he probably thought of her right now. “I know. I know it sounds like some Illuminati-type bollocks, but I’m telling you, it was real.”

“Suggestion, Viv. This isn’t like you. You want my advice? Stay away from this shyster. I don’t believe in hocus-pocus, and I know you don’t either. But I do believe in men, and hucksters, shams and fakers. Their currency isn’t discovery, like us; it’s showmanship, and deception.”

“You think I’m an idiot.” The shame made her squirm.

“I do *not* think you’re an idiot,” he said, taking a hand. “I think you’re brilliant. But I think this Ignatius chap is very clever, and very manipulative. He’s probably strung up people with twice as many brains as you. And believe me, they do exist.”

Viv laughed. Trust Robert not to sugarcoat it. She bit a fingernail. A voice told her he was being unreasonable. What if he saw the things she’d seen; that way he could see it objectively, as a scientist, just like her? “I don’t know what I saw. But I think there’s something weird going on.”

He shrugged. “Weird stuff happens in London every night. It’s not magic.”

What if it is? “No, I know it’s not, but...” She ran her tongue inside her mouth. It was hot and wet. “But what if there’s a story in there anyway? You know, strange cultish leaders, odd rites of passage, powerful people in the city. It’d be a good story.”

Robert huffed. “Viv, why are you asking me this? I teach biochemistry, remember? I’m no reporter. If you think there’s something to be had out of all this, then maybe there is. But let’s say you are right; if you are, these people could be dangerous. It’s high risk for little reward. Are you after a Pulitzer?”

No. "Maybe."

He huffed again. "Then why ask me, of all people? Surely somebody at the paper—"

"I trust your judgment, Robert," she said. She clasped her coffee cup with both hands to stop them from fidgeting. She looked at her arm, and imagined a flick-knife being plunged deep into it. In the daydream the knife went through nerve, tendon, and scraped right down to the bone. When the knife was drawn out, the wound gushed thick, clear water. When she looked up, Ignatius was standing there grinning waspishly, a flame flapping around the forefinger on his left hand. He leant down and touched her wound, and all the water hissed into evaporation, until vapour clouded her arm and she couldn't see—

"Vivienne, look at me." Robert's face was creased into worry. "You've been staring at the table for a minute now. You look bone tired. Go home and get some rest."

She pressed the heels of her hands into her eyes. "Bloody hell, you're right, I'm so tired. I'm sorry, Robert."

"Don't be. Just promise me you'll stay away from this bloke. Look, I tell you what: Peter — a colleague of mine in the Biophotonics department — he's got this crazy new research project about using novel biomaterials for regrowing teeth while they're still in your head." Robert was chuckling with excitement. Viv almost balked; *what's so exciting about teeth?* He continued, gesticulating with those big hands. "It's revolutionary. I know he'd be keen to speak to you about a small feature. It'd do you the world of good. Get back in the real world. What do you say?"

Viv nodded, one hand still pressing an eye closed.

“Good. That’s what you’re best at. Stick to that. Leave this mumbo-jumbo out of it.”

It was a half-hearted nod of agreement, but an agreement nonetheless. Robert was charming in an old fashioned way, but couldn’t be charmed himself. He’d always be a rock, good for leaning on but not much else. The truth was she was tired, but sleep seemed inadequate. This wasn’t the tiredness of a hard day’s work; this was a fatigue of the soul, brought on by a lifetime of false belief. And she knew the truth: only fire could cleanse it.

Daniel Jones 28/9/2015 10:21

Comment [2]: (what does this chapter seek to achieve? Is it a breather for Viv, is it to introduce an important character? I wonder if you could introduce a bit more in the way of stakes. Also Robert, Ig and Viv use very similar turns of phrases)

Chapter 6

Viv stayed in the café after Robert left, making arrangements with this Peter to talk about teeth. The meeting wouldn't be until tomorrow, so she went for a walk.

Unsurprisingly, she ended up at the block of apartments near Fleet Street. She talked to the concierge, but Ignatius wasn't in. She thought about leaving another message with him, but decided against it. She wondered momentarily why Ignatius didn't have his own phone, but she reckoned journalists probably weren't his usual go-to contacts. Instead, she called in at the office.

"Nice piece, Viv," said Emma over red-rimmed spectacles as she marched over to Viv's desk. They had little red horns at each side. Viv couldn't see why they were so trendy, but supposed they must be if Emma was wearing them.

"Excuse me?"

"Good column, that last one. Keep it up, we'll make a fashionista out of you yet. Though not with that outfit," she said, wagging a finger up and down in distaste.

Viv looked down at herself. She was a bit of a mess. She hadn't showered, and her clothes were yesterday's. "Sorry. Rough night."

"Yes, I'm sure," Emma said. The way she pouted through those red rims made her look like she was constantly judging. Viv wondered if there really was anything more to Emma than met the eye, or if she was just another airhead.

"Are there any more parties scheduled?"

"There are *always* parties, sweetie. One just has to know where to look. You must have figured that out by now."

Yes, she had. But she still didn't know where to look. "Have you ever been burned, Emma?"

"Urgh, all the fucking time, darling," she said, walking away.

~

Peter was nice enough, but Viv couldn't focus. Daydreams of fire and steam came unbidden, and it took quite some willpower to shut them down and enable her to listen to what he had to say. Her science managing editor, Kazim, had been open to the idea of the article and had given her his blessing. Once she would have been riveted by this radical new technology, but it seemed like a bloody trifle.

"The use of novel materials infused with nanotechnology means we're able to change the molecular structure of bad teeth," said Peter, a dullard with a West Bromwich brogue. He flashed her an excited grin as he showed her slides of various 3D molecular diagrams. His own teeth were crooked, and slightly yellow. Maybe they were his inspiration. "The tooth will regrow itself while still inside the head of the patient."

"What do you mean by bad teeth?"

"Teeth that are rotten, or where the nerve's already died. If you want your headline, you could say that we're bringing dead tissue back to life using these techniques."

She smiled wryly. "Bringing the dead back to life: that's a little overdramatic, wouldn't you say?"

Peter shrugged out a smile. "This could revolutionise things, love. We've regrown rats' teeth a few times and the basic technology is sound. We're probably some way off trying this in humans, but there's a company in America that's willing to invest and help develop the technology further. It's the end of tooth decay."

The small things drove most men, and as Viv held a model set of dentures while Peter gave her a tour of the facilities in the department – basically a few computers – she realized there weren't many things smaller than a tooth. Weeks ago this would have entranced her, but now it failed to ignite her passion. She looked for the lab window, but realised there wasn't one. Holding the dentures, she wondered if you could burn toothrot away.

"There's a medical conference I'm speaking at tomorrow in Earl's Court," said Peter at the end of their appointment. "Why not come? There'll be more on this, and you'll get to speak to some others about the work. There'll be plenty of others working on other areas: medical robotics, bioplastics, all sorts of things. You should come. There's a drinks reception afterwards. I can easily get you in as a guest."

"Yes, I think I'm free," she half-lied, hoping that something else – *someone else* – would make her a better offer.

~

Her phone mocked her with silence for the best part of two days. She'd submitted the tooth article and rewarded herself with a walk around town, but she spent most of it glued to her phone, waiting for a message that didn't come.

She regretted not putting her hand into the fire that evening. She could've done it. Even if it had hurt – even if it'd been agony – she could have wrapped Ignatius's towel around her arm and killed the flames. She bit her nails and imagined the knife burrowing its way into Ignatius's arm, right down until she could feel the scratchy resistance of bone. She looked at her own forearm, pasty and whole, and ran a finger along it.

A rundown of her social media feeds revealed a few happening parties that evening, but she'd no idea which one was which. Her hair was stuck to her forehead with sweat. The air seemed as though it was starting to cook, and she swore she heard the faintest warm-up of thunder. Beside her was a clothes shop. The highly-polished window gave a ghostly glimpse of her own reflection. A drab dress and well-worn pumps framed the woman staring back at her. That wouldn't bloody do anymore. She walked into the shop and spent an hour choosing a pair of extravagant heels, a dress, a clutch bag and something the buxom shop assistant had called "intelligent underwear."

Sweat streamed down her as she walked back to her office, but it couldn't wash away the broad smile on her face. If she had to attend Peter's conference tonight, she was going to be the one they all looked at.

~

She was right, as it turned out. The dress – a black, one-shouldered maxi with lacy detail around the hem – fitted like a glove. It was the barbaric monstrosity that she

had on under the dress that actually made it fit like a glove, but despite the pain she felt a million dollars. *In fact, she decided, the pain makes it feel even better.*

Peter's invitation to the conference had been accepted, but Viv chose to only turn up to the drinks reception. A penguin offered her a glass of cheap wine, which she refused. She'd brought her own large bottle of water, and swigged from it regularly as she wandered among the crowd.

"Hi, Viv," said Robert, his genial hug engulfing her. "You look much better than you did the other morning."

She put a hand on his shoulder and smiled. "You know what? I feel better."

"You took my advice?" he looked at her with fatherly, mock-stern eyes. "You haven't seen that whatshisname, have you?"

She raised her eyebrows. *I wish I had.* "No. Easy come, easy go."

"Peter said he was pleased with your meeting. He'll be delighted to see you. What did you think of his talk?"

"He's..." *Dull, unambitious, flat, earth.* "...he's really interesting. The article will be there this weekend. Thanks for pointing me in the right direction." Robert started saying something about Peter's teeth project, but the words washed over her as she glanced about the room, seeing if she could see anyone. "Mm hmm," she agreed, not catching his eyes. "Would you mind if I just, I'm just looking for someone I want to speak to."

Robert looked slightly put out, but he was far too polite to protest as she smiled and walked away. This type of drinks reception was something she'd been to a hundred times before: men in ill-fitting suits and badly-maintained facial hair standing just too close to her; women whose hair looked like they kept a static

electricity ball beneath their skirts. Some of them – a lot of them – were brilliant, in spite of how they looked. But she knew their lives would be spent scrabbling around for funding from research councils and Government sources for pet projects that seemed so utterly useless that it made her want to grab them by the lapels and scream at them that progress wasn't to be found in widgets and tinkering. One man – short, badly-outfitted, and wearing two pairs of spectacles – craned up to her to describe his frustrations with MOD funding for maritime power systems.

"Maybe we should just burn the whole place down," she interrupted, mid sentence. He looked at her as though she was quite mad. "And from the ashes everything can start again. What do you think?"

"I, I, I, I, ah, but you're missing the point, dear. It's ah, ah, ah, a policy issue," he said, fiddling with his spectacles, as though they held the key to the conversation. They didn't. In her heels, she towered over him, and they clacked satisfyingly on the floor as she walked away.

The circular conference hall boasted a balcony that overlooked the main auditorium; Viv perched there awhile, overlooking the throng below, deeply engaged in their conversations. She held a glass of wine but didn't drink from it. Frequently she would see the gaze of a man – *and hello, what's this? The occasional woman, too* – surreptitiously looking up to catch a glimpse of her. She smiled back and waved, at which point they embarrassedly whipped their eyes back to where they belonged. When that bored her it wasn't hard to imagine the whole edifice being razed to the ground. Many of their ideas – brilliant, of course – wouldn't amount to a great deal in their lifetime. Even brilliance became stale. Humankind – with its interminable mesh of government, huge organisations, globalized

regulations and blocks on real progress at every turn – had gotten itself into a terrible tangle where nothing really got done. Ignatius's wounded arm floated into her mind's eye. *This place – this auditorium, these people, this city, this world is becoming one giant wound. I'm wounded.* The thought of never coming into contact with Ignatius again struck, and she almost teared up. Telling herself to pull herself together, she turned away from the crowd beneath her, depriving them her gaze.

"I preferred you as a wallflower."

The woman was shorter than Viv, and had a kind of puffy, doughy face framed by unkempt brown hair flecked with strands of grey, her eyes two olives shoved into the dough, almost as an afterthought. She looked as though she'd just come from a bloody good kneading. Grey tights hung below a shapeless grey dress. An awkward smell hung about her, and her voice was a gravelly bass. *Like a man's.*

Viv put a hand upon her heart. "I'm sorry, do I–"

"Hah!" The dumpy woman waved a hand dismissively. "We don't all wear red shirts and melt hearts." The woman had a European accent she couldn't quite place, which threw her. The woman gave her side a good scratch and gave Viv a look like a leer, her fat little olives scanning up and down, as if she were considering eating her.

"I'm sorry, you are...?" asked Viv, suddenly self-conscious. Parading like a peacock in front of the hopeless men in the audience had been simplicity itself, but in front of this woman her façade was on the verge of crumbling.

"I work for the Government. Oh, nothing like that," she waved when she caught Viv's eyes widening. "I'm an evaluator for the Scientific Development Board. I decide which industrial research projects to fund. I'm a minor civil servant, a mid-tier dogsbody."

Standing in the shadows of others. Still the woman leered. In her experience men never leered, despite what people said. Men looked out of the corners of their eyes, stole glimpses of pretty ladies when they shouldn't, and then snatched their gazes back when caught out. Even Ignatius never leered; he was intrigued, hungry even, but this woman... Viv looked for a seat, but there was none. Her shoulders gooseprickled in the cool air. "What, ah, what area do you evaluate?"

"Advanced materials. I'm a metallurgist."

Viv almost laughed. "They still fund metallurgy?"

The woman looked a little offended. You couldn't offend women like her by chiding their looks. She knew that from experience. But belittle their expertise... *shame on you, Vivienne. When have you ever done that before?*

"Yes, metals are still of principal importance, I assure you. When man has exhausted the possibilities of the malleability of the earth's bounty he has exhausted life itself."

Scientists don't talk like that. But Viv knew someone who did. "I agree. I... I didn't mean to cause offence. I'm just surprised that such things are still, you know, strategically relevant to the UK. I mean, I'm a chemist, so why wouldn't I, you know..."

The woman's leer was back. "This drinks reception bores me. I fancy some air." A pack of cigarettes appeared in her hand. "You will join me?"

The tone made Viv unsure if it was an invitation or an order, but the fags were tempting.

Outside, the woman offered Vivienne one of her cigarettes but said nothing. She stood in her thick polyester dress by the conference building entrance, puffing

away industrially. In the time it took Viv to get through one of the woman's black tarsticks she'd sucked her way through three. Despite the heat, the woman remained dry as a bone, while the summer sultriness made Viv increasingly uncomfortable. Her stomach turned at the strength of the cigarettes.

"I enjoyed that very much," said the woman. When she finished she ground her cigarette out on the palm of her hand, making Viv cry out and lurch to her hand.

"What the bloody hell are you doing?" Viv turned the woman's hand over, letting the fag-end drop to the ground, dead. No burn wounded the woman's hand, and she looked at Viv with a crooked smile. Her breath stank of stale fags, making Viv reel. *It's him.*

"I think it is time," the woman said, producing another cigarette and lighting it. Viv's legs turned to jelly. The woman sucked her way through two-thirds of it and then held the cigarette between thumb and forefinger before Viv's face.

"What are you going to do?" whispered Viv.

"Give me your hand, Vivienne."

Plainly, it wasn't a request. A pained cry escaped Viv as the woman grasped her wrist and twisted it up, forcing Viv to move with her. She squirmed and squealed, trying to wriggle free, each action only aggravating the pain. The woman thrust the cigarette into Viv's palm, and she screamed as it melted into her skin.

"Look, woman, look!" The woman was crazed, fixed upon Viv's hand. Terror took the screech as she saw steam – *steam!* – and water vapour hissing out where the cigarette met her flesh, like a kettle. Transfixed, Viv stopped thrashing, calm washing her as the hiss of vapour billowed out into the hot evening's air. Finally the woman loosed her grip, casting Viv's trembling hand away. Viv fell to her backside

and gathered her hand back, studying it front and back. The wound, singing with agony, wasn't there. She became aware of her trembling breath, and a thousand questions hit her.

"Ignatius?"

The woman waved away the question. "My name is Georgiana Abercrombie. Like I said, I work for the Scientific Development Board."

Viv rubbed away the sting. Her makeup had run down her face, and she realized she was sitting on her arse in the street. She must have looked thoroughly drunk. The woman offered a hand to get her on her feet again. She needed a drink, and searched her bag for her water bottle. It was empty. "I... I need to refill my water bottle."

"Fine. But after that, we go."

"Thank you." Viv tried to smooth down her dress, but it was crumpled beyond recognition and stank of fag-ash.

"Don't worry about that ugly thing," said Georgiana. "It doesn't suit you anyway. I know something that will suit you much better."

Daniel Jones 28/9/2015 10:29

Comment [3]: (Nice to have the introduction of someone else possibilt of some secret cabal now makes lg less weirdo and more intriguing. This Georgiana woman is written well, as is lg. The problem I'm starting to feel by now is Viv. Her pov comes across as a bit mixed up: sometimes she uses overly florid language and phrasing, and other times very base terms such as 'fag-ash'). The pace of this chapter is better than the previous; you've baptised Viv nice and quickly and dealt with the action. Compare this to the lenfth of the last chapter which effectively does not push the story forward but has roughly the same length)

[Page Break](#)

Chapter 7

In a narrow alley just off Cheapside a small church sat by an even smaller livery building. The evening heat hadn't been helped by Georgiana's insistence that they walk across town rather than hail a cab.

"Don't say a word," said Georgiana, knocking upon the door to the church.

With a smooth *thunk* a viewing hatch slid open. Two slitty eyes peered out, eyeing the two women for a few seconds. A decrepit male voice asked, "Are you here for nightprayers?"

"For the one who answers nightprayers," replied Georgiana.

The voice made a harrumphing sound, and the eyes flicked over to Viv.

"Who's this one?"

"Fire has called her."

"She is known?"

"She was found by fire, and touched by fire. Tonight, she may be cleansed by fire."

The viewing hatch slid shut with a snap, and she heard the muffled clicks of locks opening.

"What do you mean, I will be cleansed by fire?"

"That is for Fire to decide."

"You mean Ignatius? Ignatius is Fire?"

The door swung open. Behind it was a stooped, balding gentleman dressed in verger's cloth, wringing knobbled fingers together feverishly. Beneath his crooked smile a hand shot out and grabbed Viv's own, studying it, much to her revulsion.

"Water," the verger grinned through yellowing teeth. "Yes, yes. You're ready to merge with fire?"

Her heart skipped a beat. Merging with fire; what the bloody hell did that mean? Georgiana must have read her face. "It means you will become one of us," she said.

After that, neither of them said a word as they led Viv through the church. A side door led down into the church's small and fusty crypt. The verger walked to the back of the crypt and swept a hand along the dusty wall. He knocked, but instead of a dull thump came a hollow crack against the old man's knuckles, which made her jump. A second after the crack came a louder scraping noise, and the wall came away.

"This is all very Ignatius," Viv said.

"This is all very necessary," snapped Georgiana as the door scraped against the stone floor. "Before you arise you are merely a blind woman, as infertile as dust." Her hand flicked in dismissal. "Am I wrong?"

"I-"

"You underestimate her," came the voice beyond the doorway. Ignatius appeared, sticking to the shadows like a panther. Hunched beneath the stone lintel, he looked as though he were propping up the entire building with his shoulders.

"Georgiana. You ought to be more courteous to our newest initiate. You know what she represents."

Georgiana bowed her head, sullen.

“Vivienne, come this way. You must see what we have planned tonight.”

Viv followed Ignatius through the doorway to a darkened hall; whatever was in it remained covered by shadows, but it must have been pretty big, for the scuffs of their feet on the stone floor reverberated liberally: the skeletal *clack* of the verger’s feet, Georgiana’s dumpy feet clumping like sacks of flour, her own feet softly padding along, while Ignatius almost floated, making no sound. Viv could just about see he was wearing some kind of red, wide-collared robe.

Ignatius stopped walking, clicked his fingers and conjured a flame from the air. The flame darted to candle sconces on the walls and floor, from one to another around the hall’s edge until the hall revealed itself. When she saw it she gasped.

The ceiling sloped upwards from every corner, to a triangular cutaway apex, allowing the constellations to peek in. A giant tetrahedron! Just like the penthouse. The three sloping walls were daubed in all manner of strange symbols and glyphs: one side displayed swirls and eddies, waves and currents, people swimming, people diving, and a hundred different types of fish; the next showed yet further currents and waves, but these were lighter, and birds flew among them, soaring high into the sky; on the third side were trees at the feet of mountains, reaching up to the heavens, capped by snowy peaks as ice and air and earth came together.

Earth, air, water. So where’s...

“Fire,” spoke up Ignatius, now at the centre of the hall, his voice echoing gently off the stone. By him stood a throng of silent figures, all clad in plain red robes, their faces uncovered yet expressionless. Viv thought she recognized one or two of them, perhaps from one of the parties, but couldn’t remember where or how.

Confusingly, apart from Ignatius himself, they all looked thoroughly unremarkable; these weren't models, or famous politicians, or rich philanthropists. *It is in the shadows of other men and women where you'll find us*, Ignatius had said. When recognition finally hit, her jaw slackened; it was the bloody penguin, the waiter who'd served her champagne. *I'm like you; I'm not one of them*, she'd thought back then. Unbidden, a smile wrinkled out of the corner of her face as she finally understood. She hadn't been like the penguin at all; but maybe now she might be.

"Eternal life," continued Ignatius, slowly walking around the robed figures, touching each unmoving figure lightly upon the shoulder. Viv yearned for the warm press of that hand. "Elementary life. It allows us to arise. To resurge. To build. To guide those in need of guidance. But remember, ours is a brittle order, as brittle as kindling. So we must strengthen our resolve with new flesh." He looked at her. "Fresh blood."

My blood. Viv's pulse quickened at catching his eyes; an itch to turn and walk away ran up and down her spine; she glanced towards the door but the way was blocked by Georgiana's fat, doughy bosoms. Her chest felt constricted; all this secrecy and theatre once felt like hollow performance, but now it felt like the centre of the universe, and she hated it. It made a mockery of everything – all the learning, all the science, all the knowledge – she'd ever amassed.

"Come," said Ignatius, and he walked away from the throng. At his word, the robed disciples walked away from the centre of the hall to its edges. A bulb of bile had risen into Viv's throat as she saw the pyre revealed from behind them. It was long, four feet high, and stacked with piles upon piles of kindling. Her stomach

turned, but Ignatius was by her side, and placed his warm hand around hers. His touch instantly soothed the trembling in her gut.

“Is that for me?” Viv’s voice was shaky.

Ignatius chuckled. “A little severe, for an initiate, don’t you think?” Before she could answer he walked away from her. A large figure, cloaked and hooded, was brought by two others from an unseen entrance into the centre of the room. When Ignatius reached them he sent the two attendees to the outer reaches of the room, and whipped the cloak off to reveal the naked, wheezing mass that was Anton Petrowski. She covered her mouth, repulsed: his flesh was dappled with blotches and liver spots, sagging over his chest and hips in disgusting mounds and rolls; a short, podgy penis popped its head out between two blancmange thighs, like a bald meerkat; his bald head was dry and pasty, covered in flaky eczema. His passionless face regarded Ignatius, who came to him and took his head in his warm hands. He whispered something inaudible in Anton’s ear before running those hands over his face and finally taking Anton’s fat, podgy hand in his own, and leading him to the pyre. Viv’s stomach churned in understanding, and she took a step back. She felt Georgiana’s firm, heavy bosom prod her in the back, preventing further egress, and she stood still. Her throat, parched, demanded water, but somehow digging into her bag for that big bottle felt untoward, and she let herself go dry.

“Life beyond the elementary is linear,” announced Ignatius. “Birth, growth, procreation, diminishment, death. Dust to dust, blown away by air and sea. But within the elementary, life becomes cyclical; a weary and spent life is not merely fated to shrivel, calcify and retire to below the ground. Fire...” he flicked a flame from his finger, illuminating his face in the shadows. In the dim light Viv made out

Anton clumsily settling himself down on top of the pyre, eventually facing the ceiling. Viv winced; the sticks and wood digging into his back must have been agonizing. "Fire strips away the old and dead," continued Ignatius, "revealing new possibilities beneath." He gestured to some of the robed acolytes around the edge of the room.

"He's to be burned," Viv whispered to Georgiana.

"No," came back the hushed but animated reply. "Reborn!"

Two acolytes brought forth large goblets to Ignatius, who took them and poured their contents over the huge trunk of Anton Petrowski. The huge whale moved nary a muscle as the oil, slick and copious, explored his every crevice, preparing him for the flame. Viv turned, but only saw Georgiana's fat face leering at her. "Not going anywhere, my dear."

It could still all be a trick, she wanted to say to the doughy fat woman, but she knew it would have been futile to argue with her. She probably had dough between the ears. It *could* have been a trick: everything, the visions, the words, the people, this... pain shot up her arm as Georgiana's porky fingers clamped around her wrist and contorted her into submission. Georgiana's other hand grabbed the nape of her neck, as if she were just a puppy, and forced her to regard the scene as Ignatius threw the goblets to the floor, where they crashed with a loud, echoing clatter. The fine hairs on Viv's arms began to raise and stretch, yet she still felt *warm*.

"When life becomes tired," said Ignatius, casting a potent look around the room, but seeming to linger on Viv's eyes, "or when the dull eyes of those untouched by the elements look upon us too long; that is when fire will reinvigorate us, and allow us to transcend what the others believe. And, in time, we will guide them to somewhere better. Somewhere eternal." He looked intently at his finger as

the flame suddenly grew, licking its way along Ignatius's arm, before he put his flaming finger onto Petrowski, where it caught and greedily drank in the precious oil, crawling over him like so many orange hydra, taking the flesh for its own.

Viv tensed all over. Yards separated her and the pyre, but she could still feel its heat from there. Her mind swam with headiness. Instinct screamed at her to escape, to get away, but the iron clamp upon her wrist prohibited any movement.

"Water." The word emanated from her like a ghost, as if unsummoned, an unconscious vapour.

Petrowski's body was almost entirely hidden beneath growing, rising flames, but where it had initially been calm, it now started to twitch. A sound eked out from Petrowski's mouth, a kind of spasmodic clacking, and then a howl, a shuddering screech, freezing Viv's blood and creeping across her skin. This wasn't right. It was a trick. The heat oppressed her. Noises came from her mouth, vainly trying to drown out his terrible screams. Tears choked Viv's voice and clogged up her eyes, but she couldn't tear the vision away. This wasn't rebirth; it was just death; horrific, pointless self-sacrifice. And she would be next. Her hands flailed, trying to free herself from Georgiana's grasp, but the fat woman swore and held her fast. Watery vomit rose in her throat and spewed out across Georgiana and the floor. Repulsed, Georgiana recoiled for the merest moment, but it was enough to overcome her cramping stomach and wriggle away on her hands and knees. The water bottle spilled out of her bag and rolled across the floor. Ignatius must have seen the kerfuffle, for Viv could hear his voice above her, sharp but hushed. "What the fuck are you two doing? Georgiana?"

Viv didn't look at him. His penetrating eyes would be unbearable. "I need my water."

"Dear Christ," spat Ignatius. "Georgiana, let the woman drink some water. And if you disrupt this any longer, I will *burn* you. I'll burn you in fucking hellfire so you'll *never* be reborn."

Viv shuddered at his voice. It was beastly and dark, like lava. Georgiana's voice cracked to a whimper, dough becoming jelly. "She was trying to leave."

"Vivienne," he said, helping her to her feet. She wouldn't look at him, but his hand, warm, reassuring, seductive, almost quelled her thumping heart. "Watch, my dear," he whispered. "I understand the fear. Do you think I've not felt afraid before?"

The stink of molten pork wafted across the hall. Black smoke billowed up, up, cascading upwards around the three sides of the hall, passing the tableaux of earth, air and water, before disappearing into the London air through the cutaway. Viv's stomach, already sensitive, curled in on itself again. Seeing this, Ignatius gestured to her water. "Take a drink."

The water, sloshing around the plastic bottle as she picked it up, seemed filled with life. So different to Petrowski's body, writhing, convulsing, and emitting a pathetic whistling sound. Every now and then there'd be a *pop* as some part of him exploded. Unbearable. The top was off the water, but she couldn't drink it. She was running to the pyre before she could help it. The heat raged, and pushed her back, but she fought it. Water flew from the bottle as she shook it, covering the burning body with droplets. They sizzled and disappeared on impact, but she had to do something to stop it. If she was water, this was what she was supposed to do. Kill the

fire. She was closer now, the heat blistering, furious, but she bore it. This whole charade: trickery, cultism, bloody murder; she scolded herself for being duped by it. Pouring a bottle of water over a burning body might achieve nothing, but it was her final act of resistance, and she'd see it done. The water covered Petrowski now, killing some of the flames. His screams turns to howls as the water blistered and puckered his flesh.

"No! Vivienne, stop!" Ignatius was upon her, wresting the bottle from her and flinging her to the floor. He cursed when he saw it had been spent, and stooped to grab her by the arms. His face, split with rage, was almost touching her own. His breath was as hot and as foul as the burning corpse of Petrowski. He clutched her jaw and forced her to look at the pyre. Black acidity drifted from the grey-pink body of Petrowski, which lay naked, shivering and convulsing. The fire had stopped. *Impossible. How?* She saw the water bottle lying empty; it couldn't have held more than a litre of water. So how...?

"You corrupted the ritual of rebirth," growled Ignatius, pushing her head away in disgust. Her stomach was water, and though she wanted to vomit again, there was nothing left inside her except raw ache. Trembling, she tried to speak, but managed only a cry when the body of Petrowski started to twitch, and then sat up upon the pyre. It moved creakily, like a badly-oiled automaton. Despite the heat in the room, her blood was icy cold. The Petrowski-thing reached out, putting a jellylike hand upon the crumbling wood. It collapsed, sending him to the floor with a crash and a groan. Then came the agony. A ghastly, guttural roar as the creature awoke. Ignatius, eyes widened, regarded the creature with pure horror.

"Anton, my dear Anton..."

The creature stood unsteadily, liable to collapse at any moment. Dollops of partly-charred flesh dropped from it, while spools of pink and dark liquid wept from various wounds and orifices. Viv blanched as it turned to look at her. One eye had been melted away, but the other was an orb of purest white and drilled its gaze into her unrelentingly. Shakily, it raised a hand and managed to point at her.

Ignatius turned to look at her. "I know," he said. From nowhere a long, stiletto-style blade appeared in his hand as he rose to his feet. Suddenly she was aware of the eyes of all the room upon her. This blade wouldn't be for his arm.

"Please, Ignatius, please, I'm..."

"Water," he said, his face calmer than before. "Water. I've never been able to tame you. You always... you always *burn* me so." He flourished the blade, walked behind the Petrowski-Thing and slashed its throat. Black blood gushed over its molten chest as it finally collapsed. The acolytes had gathered behind Ignatius.

"Please, Ignatius. Don't make me into that. I... I can't be burned."

"No."

Georgiana and the verger were in the throng. "Let me bind her for you, Fire," she said in thick, hateful tones. Viv wanted to steal Ignatius's blade and stick it through her vicious, piggy eyes. Instead she sat, cold and trembling, waiting for the inevitable.

"No, Georgiana. If water will not submit to the flame, then I cannot rule it." He turned to Viv and his hawkish smile had returned, though somehow diminished, sad around the eyes.

Viv tried forming words, but she couldn't think of a single thing to say. Some part of her had wanted to taste the flame, to live forever, but that feeling had fizzled

out like the embers of Petrowski's doomed pyre. She got to her feet, tottering, fearing she might collapse and be unable to rise again, but she willed herself to stay upright. She looked at the way she'd come in. It was closed, but unattended. Seeing her glance, Ignatius nodded. "Go, if you wish."

She walked to the door, wishing away the dozens of judging eyes. When she stepped through, she didn't look back. Walking away from the church on the main road, she cast her eye up to see the merest tendrils of smoke dissipating into the air, and noticed the weathervane atop the church. It was in the shape of a dragon, belching fire.

Chapter 8

The next day was broiling, roasting, as if the sun sought vengeance for some wrong it had suffered. The weatherman said it was to be the hottest day of the year, but Viv stayed curled up in bed with the covers wrapped around her, unable to face it. She'd texted in sick, but only afterwards realized it was Saturday. Great. That'd look weird.

It wasn't until sundown that she ventured from her pit, sweating, shaking and sleep-deprived. Sleep hadn't visited her at all during night or day; the fear of Georgiana's doughy hands clambering through her windows to strangle her, or Ignatius appearing beside her wreathed in blood, kept her awake. She feared losing her sanity, but when the images of everything she'd seen flooded back, she wondered if she already had. Overhead a plane soared into invisibility, leaving white contrails in its wake, bound for somewhere new. She wished she were on it, wherever it was headed. That feeling passed, like everything else she'd experienced that day, leaving only empty exhaustion and confusion. At the very least she had an incredible story. *But would they put it under science, or lifestyle?* She smiled weakly at her own feeble wit. It was a pertinent question; could she write up this strange account? Embarrassment tore at her each time she considered how she'd been had by Ignatius's whole sorry charade. Even now, doubts lingered. What of the fag-wound in her hand? The Petrowski-thing? "All tricks, all subterfuge," she whispered at the sky. Saying it aloud made it somehow more palatable, and made her feel slightly stronger. The thought of food entered her mind, and her stomach gnawed in agreement.

She was out of breath, which made her curse. She could venture to the shop before it was totally dark. Shivering, she pulled on thick tights before jeans, a pullover and gilet before heading out. It was still a stinking hot evening, but she pulled her clothes close, like armour.

Her head was buried into her chest, ignoring the world, so the car hit her without giving her a moment's notice. She was launched onto her back, blinking confusedly at a fading violet sky, breathing jaggedly, trying to speak but only managing whimpers. Something felt broken. Her body was still, and she didn't dare move it.

The driver of the car, a lad no older than twenty, rushed out and got to her side, flapping and panicking. Amid the panic she made out the words *ambulance* and *help*. He dialed the emergency services while she waited there. Dogtired, she had to fight with her every fibre to remain awake. She managed a smile at the stressed young man, who couldn't even bring himself to hold her hand. Poor, dumb lad. "Hey, don't worry," she whispered. "It's not your fault. Just don't... don't let me die, ok?"

"I'm so sorry," he kept uttering, over and over. She didn't mind. It helped keep her awake. The thought of death, of taking everything with her to the grave terrified her more than any fire. She hoped to God she wasn't dying.

It was two minutes before the ambulance came, but two minutes of mounting pain that felt like hours. That was good, she decided. Beneath all her clothes she felt wet, but relaxed. The world was fading as a large, uniformed paramedic walked into view against a flashing blue backdrop.

"Hello? Hello?" The paramedic's voice was cool and calm, like summer rain. It brought an unbidden smile from her. She heard other words: *losing blood... move...*

time... Against all her fight, her eyes softly closed and images swarmed in the darkness: wounded and burned arms and hands, smouldering bodies melting into rain, and then billowing into dust clouds. Just before she slipped into unconsciousness she called out a word.

~

When she awoke there was still pain. Only pain. Waves of it, right down to her bones. Sharp, knobby things poked at her naked back, stabbing her, making her writhe, which brought the pain anew. She cried out, a twisted yelp. It was hot, yet gooseprickles erected themselves across her battered, naked body. She knew immediately where she was.

"Sorry, my dear," came a waspish voice, just out of view. "You will have to endure the pain a little while longer. But you will endure it, for death is a miserable alternative, isn't it? You certainly thought so, when you called for me. Wasn't it lucky that one of the paramedics knew exactly where to deliver you?"

Of course. That ambulance had arrived a bit sharpish. Bloody bastards. Viv tried stretching out but every move brought yet more agony. Above her were converging images: water, air, earth, sloping away to a distant, bright point. *A bit like the end of a tunnel.* She managed a hoarse whisper. "I'm not dying?"

Ignatius clicked his fingers, creating a ball of flame. "I'm afraid you are. Mortal death. Broken bones, broken back. Unfixable. Torturous pain. Or, will you right what you wronged? You owe me the time you took from one of our own." He held out his arm in front of her, the fire wreathing it, just as it had done in the

penthouse that evening. She wept. She didn't want to die after all. Oil, hot and slick, wet her face and body, seeping into her pores and crevices like a lover.

"I don't want to die."

"You won't. You'll be reborn."

She wanted to spit at him, spit at them all, no doubt staring blankly at her naked body from beneath their heavy robes in the shadows. But she couldn't. All she could do was scold herself. She didn't believe it. It had all been bullshit. But what good did it do to scorn them now? She nodded. "Bloody do it, then."

His eyes, fiery red, were the last parts of him she saw before the flame caught and greedily lapped up the oil. For a few seconds there was no pain as the oil burned away, and thin, grey smoke danced prettily towards the ceiling. Then it came, burrowing, peeling, scorching, and she screamed. She screamed so loudly she almost drowned out the steaming *hiss* when the fire hit her flesh. Then the flames took the screams from her throat, and the last thing she heard was her own crackle and spit.

Epilogue

Feng waited patiently by the gate for the flight to begin boarding. He yawned and stretched, which made him feel lighter. One more flight to London to look after and then he'd have some precious time off. There was a cute boy he'd met a couple of weeks ago at a comedy night in Hackney. After he recovered from the jetlag he'd give him a call.

Night flights always were his favourite; breezing through the air, with the licence to drift off to sleep. Some of the other flight attendants bitched about how cramped the CRCs were, but he didn't mind. Besides, he was only a waif of a thing himself. He smiled with eyes closed. According to the manifest it would be a nice, empty flight, too. Perfect.

The departure lounge, despite being empty, felt fusty and suffocating. He winced, fingering his collar to let some air in, but it did no good. Perhaps the air con was broken? He pressed fingers into the corners of his screwed up eyes and started when he opened them, before emitting a little laugh of surprise. A woman had taken the seat next to him. Early. Passenger. Smart, dressed in an electric blue skirt suit. She smiled at him. "Sorry," he said. "You were very quiet."

"Don't apologise," smiled the woman. She had fabulous turquoise eyes, like pools, gushing with life. "You work on the airline, Feng?"

He screwed his face up. How did she know his... her gaze dropped to the name badge pinned to his chest, and he smiled in embarrassment. "Sorry. I forget I'm wearing it half the time. Yes, it was my dream job," he cooed. "Always wanted to

do it. Not just for any old airline though. None of that cheap flight silliness!" He leant in and smiled. "I wanted the prestige."

"Don't we all." The woman pressed a hand upon Feng's; it was warm, and felt wet, which made him uncomfortable. "Is something the matter?"

Feng laughed. "Oh sorry, no. Not at all. It's just very hot in here. It makes me uncomfortable. I like the cabins in the plane – they're always kept nicely cool. Usually it's pretty cool here too, but something's different. The air con's probably screwed."

"I never used to like the heat either. But I learned." There was an awkward pause, during which the woman fished a large bottle of water from her travel bag, from which she enjoyed a long draught. "I envy you, Feng. You could have it all in front of you, if you chose."

Feng spoke slowly, discomfited. "Chose what?"

"What you do defines you, Feng. And what you've chosen to do is no coincidence. When we get back to London, let me show you something that'll keep you from being bored ever again."

Feng opened his mouth but said nothing. He'd be jetlagged, exhausted, in need of bed. "Sure, why not," he said. He'd always been fickle like that. Just like the wind.

~

END