Helping your children choose books they will love



Lovereading4kids.co.uk is a book website created for parents and children to make choosing books easy and fun

Opening extract from

The Whisper

Written by

Emma Clayton

Published by

Chicken House Ltd

All Text is Copyright © of the Author and/or Illustrator

Please print off and read at your leisure.





1
A GLITCH

As darkness fell on the cliffs of Cape Wrath, a storm blew in from the North Sea. There had been many storms at Cape Wrath before, but this one rocked around the fortress as if a DJ were spinning dark matter. Waves boomed against the cliffs, clouds rolled like molten lead and all those elements in between warped in the night as if part of the strange event that was occurring in the fortress.

For most of the day, the dormitories had been as quiet as tombs. Thousands of children lay in rows of metal beds, sleeping so silently in the dim light that the nurses had to lean right over them to make sure they were still breathing.

The new implants glowed like moons on their foreheads. Their sheets covered them like shrouds.

The nurses treated the wounds around the implants as if they were caring for crops or things, just stuff, not the living,

breathing, feisty children who had filled the arcades with rush and noise, Pod Fighter T-shirts and talk of the game. The implants were working. Now these children were Northern Government property: pilots and gunners, weapons of war.

But as darkness fell and the storm rolled in, the implanted army began to stir.

It breathed, faster.

Eyelids flickered, as if brains were rebooting.

It whispered and writhed, frowned and tangled in its long white gowns and sheets, until it looked like a shoal of fish trying to escape from a net.

Now, this was not supposed to happen.

These children had been told to sleep until they were needed.

There were only two nurses in each dormitory. For a while they watched the children stir, not quite sure what was happening. But as the army began to rise like mist from those long lines of beds, the nurses were gripped by dark horror, as if they were witnessing a morgue of corpses rising. Some tried to bully the children back to their beds, as if they were still just children, but most ran as if a dam had burst.

Waves boomed against the cliffs.

Wind howled.

Darkness warped.

Now it felt as if the storm was inside the fortress.

The implanted army rose, and the nurses ran, gasping with fright.

Implant engineers rushed to Mal Gorman's office. The dormitory nurses were hot on their heels, followed by any other members of staff who suspected they might get blamed for the awakening. While all this was going on, Ralph, the butler, was in the kitchen next to Mal Gorman's dressing room, preparing his master's supper.

As he walked towards the door with the tray, alarms began to wail and a herd of nurses ran past with their hair flying from their buns. He paused. It was clearly not a good time to deliver cheese

on toast to the Minister for Youth Development, but since Mal Gorman had ordered it, the butler decided he'd better deliver it. He valued his head almost as much as the nurses sprinting past him valued theirs.

The office was as packed as a Tube train at rush hour. It took all of Ralph's best navigation skills to carve a path through it to the desk. Mal Gorman made a frightening spectacle. While his staff crushed in around him, he sat at his desk, illuminated by the light of its giant screen. He was a government minister from a broken world; half bone, half blinking machine.

A mass of tubes and wires connected him to a life-support system on the frame around his chair.

The eyes in his skull face were poison pale.

He was building up to one of his venomous outbursts.

The butler prepared to set down the tray on the corner of the desk.

'Not there,' Gorman said.

'Where would you like it, sir?'

'Not on the desk, you fool, I won't be able to see what's happening.'

Images flickered across the screen. His skeletal hands touched heads and gowns. He shuffled views like playing cards and watched his implanted army run, like a cat watches a mouse it has been torturing. It would not get far before he pounced on it again. He had taken these children to fight for the vast riches on the other side of The Wall.

There was nowhere else to put the tray. Ralph looked around, but every centimetre of floor had a panicking person standing upon it.

'Stop hovering,' Gorman said. 'Get out.'

The butler left, the tray still in his hand.

Gorman's eyes remained glued to the screen.

The engineers were telling him the awakening was a glitch that could be fixed via a computer. But some of the children now had blood seeping from the wounds around their implants.

Running around in such a state, they were damaging Northern Government property.

'Hurry up!' he yelled. 'Fix this glitch before these children make themselves even more stupid!'

It did not occur to him for a moment that there was no glitch to fix, that these children had been strong enough to defy their implants and climb out of bed. For what he had unwittingly harvested, from the arcades he had built across the North, was a spectacular upgrade of the human design: children who were smarter, stronger and more likely to survive than any born before them. And among their repertoire of strange new talents was the ability to connect with each other. Even in their sleep.

Mal Gorman did not know this, yet he was the one who'd made it happen. An hour before, he'd reunited the twins Mika and Ellie and formed the clasp that would hold this new connection together, that would cause the start of a seismic shift in the human world order. While he was thinking about cheese on toast, twenty-seven thousand sleeping children were downloading the contents of Mika Smith's mind. That quiet, clever, black-eyed boy who'd flown over The Wall . . .

There was no glitch to fix.

These children were running because they now knew what lay on the other side.

One of the nurses was trying to talk to him, trying to tell him that the army had climbed out of bed knowing impossible things. But he didn't hear her. The nurses were annoying him; they were talking all at once, crowding around his desk, hot-faced and disarrayed.

'Get out!' he yelled. 'I can't breathe with you all flapping around me! Someone fix this glitch – now!'

The implanted army had awoken knowing there were trees and animals on the other side of The Wall and that they themselves had been taken to bomb them. But it wasn't going to be easy to escape from that fortress.

The implants had been shot like bolts into their heads and

were still fighting for control, demanding the children obey the Northern Government, ordering them to sleep until they were needed. The children had been strong enough to wake themselves up, but moving away from those lines of beds felt like pulling against the jaws of a mantrap. The moment they ran out of the dormitories and into the fortress passages, they felt an intense, punitive pain in their minds that made them drop the connection that had formed when Mika and Ellie touched. And this connection was important. They would need it to work out what to do. For what they'd learned from Mika while they slept made the concrete feel like quicksand beneath their feet. They ran in a wild panic with it all hot in their heads.

They were born behind The Wall. They were the firstborn children of the refugees who'd fled north from the Animal Plague. And like their parents, they'd believed that The Wall had been built to protect them. That now, after forty-three years, there was nothing but poisoned dust on the other side. But in their sleep they'd flown over The Wall and run with Mika through a *dark forest*.

They'd watched dawn light pour through trees.

They'd flown over the mansions of the rich elite who had stolen their parents' land.

And seen *real animals*! And borgs too. The giant silver eagles and wolves that guarded all this beauty and would rip their parents apart if they tried to reclaim their land.

The Animal Plague had never happened.

Their parents had been tricked into moving into a giant concrete cage.

But . . .

. . . as well as shock, this made the children feel happy.

There were trees and animals on the other side of The Wall!

They'd grown up believing such beauty was destroyed by the humans born before them.

But now they were being drawn into a smash-and-grab, a greed-fuelled fight for territory that had been going on as long as

humans could stand up and hold a weapon. The Northern Government was trying to use them to fight for that land on the other side of The Wall. But no lump of metal, no glowing moon, no knife-sharpening, flickering bone machine would make children like these bomb forests full of animals, even for their parents if their parents knew the truth. They'd grown up aching for such beauty.

They knew this as they ran. But the boy Mika, who'd shown them the forest, felt lost to them now. Their connection had dropped, and without it, they had no idea how to help themselves.

The fortress passages were cramped and cold. There were cameras everywhere. The children ran in a river of heads and white gowns with the fortress watching them. Alarms began to wail, but all the passages looked the same. There were no signs, no windows, just a recurring nightmare of dormitories and blood-stained pillows. Soon the atmosphere was hysterical and they were dragging each other along. A boy, Tom, ran with a girl called Ana, and he held her hand as if his life depended on her. She felt like all he had left; she was the only person he recognized from his arcade.

'They told us we were playing a game,' Ana gasped. 'I thought I was playing a game!'

'I know,' Tom panted. 'They lied. Forget the game, Ana. It's gone. Let's just get out of here.'

They found stairs and ran up, stubbing their toes on the concrete steps. At the top they felt blasts of icy wind. The children ahead had found fire doors leading out of the fortress. They felt relieved. And then they ran into the Cape Wrath storm.

They were almost blown off their feet. They pulled up sharp, gasping with shock, as the storm lurched around them. Wind howled, waves boomed and the ground beneath their feet was rocky and slippery with rain. They couldn't see anything but the spectral forms of other children running away. In their gowns

they looked like hundreds of white smudges on the darkness.

Now they had the feeling they'd left something important behind.

What?

Shoes.

No, not shoes.

This was more important than shoes.

But what?

It was in their heads, big and blurred, but feeling so much pain from their implants, they could not figure out what.

Tom and Ana were blocking the path of those behind them. As the children pushed forward, Tom lost Ana's hand. He slipped sideways down rock, and by the time he recovered, he couldn't see her. Then he was frantic, stumbling through the crowd, shouting her name over the wind. He started to run, blind in the darkness, desperate to find her again. He ran, without realizing it, towards the edge of the cliff and a brutal, deadly fall. Then he thought he saw her. Just ahead of him. But no sooner had he seen her than her feet slipped, the back of her head smacked hard on rock and she began to slide down the cliff. Tom sprinted to save her, but others reached her first, grabbing at her wet arms, trying to pull her back as she screamed and dangled over the sea. Hands slipped, gripped, yanked and she scrambled frantically with her feet. By the time she was standing on firm ground, her legs were cut to shreds and she was sobbing with shock.

But it was not Ana. It was another girl, who looked like Ana. Then Tom watched her weep in the arms of a boy and realized it was only fate that made Ana a friend and this girl a stranger.

They were not strangers.

And they needed each other.

The connection would return with that thought in their minds.

They backed away from the cliff and turned to face the

fortress. It loomed over them like a dark and silent lord. They began to run again, desperate to get away from it, and followed its great black wall as it curved away from the sea. Eventually, they saw the nearest town in the distance – towers, factories and traffic trunks in a haze of yellow light. They ran on, faster, thinking of the normal adults who could help them there, until a fence loomed out of the darkness, a giant chain-link fence. It buzzed and hissed where the rain touched it.

They pulled up and turned to stop their friends from running into it.

Every metre hung yellow signs, bearing grey skulls flanked by lightning bolts, as if Mal Gorman had used a picture of himself to warn them what would happen if they touched it. The fence enclosed the land around the fortress and ended halfway down the cliffs.

They were trapped.

* * *

The screen on Mal Gorman's desktop looked liquid. As he gazed into it, he wished he could dip his hand through the surface and scoop his children up. Squeeze them until they squeaked. Drop them into their beds. But instead he was forced to watch them pour over the rocks like spilled milk. He was quite sure they wouldn't get away, but as they massed along the line of the electric fence, he felt the first twinge of panic. He hadn't expected them to stay awake this long.

'Someone tell me what's happening,' he said.

'We don't know yet, sir,' an engineer replied.

'I thought you were running a diagnostic program to find the glitch in the implants.'

'We did, sir. But we still don't know what's wrong.'

'Then look out of the window!' Gorman yelled. 'All those little white dots on the rocks aren't dandruff or snowflakes or marshmallows; they're children in nightgowns with nothing on their feet! Look out of the window and see what's wrong! I want

this glitch found and I want it fixed! I want my children back in bed, ready to fight the war!'

* * *

The children massed along the fence, realizing they were trapped. But as they stopped running, the punitive pain of their implants subsided and they were able to think again. They thought hard. The game had taught them how to strategize for survival, and they did it now.

In this state, their new connection returned.

One by one, as their minds focused, they joined like links in a chain. Then they heard The Whisper, the quiet sound of their thoughts flowing like a river through their minds. And as they listened, they realized something important, that this new connection would hold only while they were quiet like this. While they were running around, overcome by fierce emotion, The Whisper was lost to The Roar.

The Whisper was the sound of thoughts, they realized.

The Roar was the sound of emotion.

They realized this as they gazed through the fence.

The wind whipped their gowns and they listened to each other.

We have to stay calm so we can hear this.

We have to accept what they've done to us so we can work out what to do about it.

We shouldn't have run out of the fortress like that.

Now we're trapped.

And we've left something behind.

What have we left behind?

As they focused, the answer began to take shape. It had almost reached the tip of their tongues, when a noise ripped through the sky that left claw marks in the clouds. Immediately, the children felt the blood jump in their veins.

Pod Fighters!

They looked up, all at once, as if their heads were jerked on

strings. Then a single thought flashed through them all, as fast as the electricity running through the fence.

* * *

'What are they doing?' Gorman asked.

He couldn't hear the Pod Fighters through the thick glass of his window.

The engineers gathered and they watched the children gaze at the sky. The children looked like a pale ring around the fortress.

'They've seen something, sir.'

'Well, yes,' Gorman sneered. 'But what?'

'Pod Fighters. A squadron of Pod Fighters has just returned to the fortress.'

Gorman laughed.

'Brilliant!' he mocked. 'So they've only just realized there are Pod Fighters in the fortress! Did they think I was going to send them to war in their parents' hover cars? They're even more stupid than I thought . . .'

But as fast as the children had frozen, they became a fluid mass again, surging towards the fortress like a noose closing on its throat.

The green worm of Gorman's heartbeat began to bolt across a screen.

'Lock the doors,' he said. 'Don't let them back in. If we let them back in, they'll go for their Pod Fighters. They're going to try to get their Pod Fighters and escape.'

'Yes, sir.'

Gorman watched the children swarm towards the fire doors.

'How are they communicating?' he asked. 'They look as if they're communicating, but they can't, spread out like that. It's not possible.'

The children reached the fortress and pressed hard against it.

Now Gorman felt afraid. All at once he felt as if he were watching aliens instead of children. That he'd harvested a crop of aliens to fight his war. He'd felt this unsettling sensation in the

past, in the company of the mutants like Mika and Ellie, but never with these normal children.

'I don't like it,' he said. 'They're being weird.'

'The doors are locked, sir. They can't get back in.'

'That's not the point,' Gorman said. 'I've had enough of this now. I want these children under control. I told them to sleep until they were needed, and they're trying to run away from me.'

He continued to watch them. Suddenly he felt vicious, as if he wanted to slap them down in the hardest, cruellest way.

'Release the Creeper Nets,' he said.

The engineers looked shocked.

'The Creeper Nets, sir?'

'Yes, the Creeper Nets.'

'But the Creeper Nets are weapons. The children will be injured.'

'Good,' Gorman replied. 'They need teaching a lesson. Perhaps when they've felt the stab of a Creeper Net, they'll remember who's in control. I want my army back in bed.'

* * *

The children pressed against the fortress, tugging on the wet bars of the fire doors. Their connection was faltering again. They were killing it with panic.

They'd left their Pod Fighters behind!

How could they have made such a terrible mistake?

It was difficult to accept they'd done it, and they continued to tug on the doors long after they realized they were locked.

But after a few minutes, they heard the grunt and grind of heavy metal. Startled, they backed away, not sure where the noise was coming from. Then they saw holes appear in the walls of the fortress where it met the rock of Cape Wrath. For a moment they considered using these as another route back in, then they heard a metallic scuttling sound and realized there was something in them.

They pulled back slowly, still reluctant to leave, but when

they saw the Creeper Nets reach the mouths of the tunnels, they turned and ran in terror.

The Creeper Nets erupted in a spindly black mass and spread up the wall of the fortress. Then they spilled over the rocks, scuttling madly on hard, spike-tipped feet. It was difficult to see them through the darkness and the rain, but they looked like something hatching. Something made of scorpions and bats and spiders with some of their legs pulled off.

Each Creeper Net had five barbed legs with a black wire net stretched between them. When they reached the children, they rose and bloomed like black flowers ready to strike. They struck hard, with one leg that arched back and came down with the speed of a paintbrush stippling canvas. The attacks were so fast and brutal, the first children fell without even seeing them – jerking like starfish, collapsing like puppets, paralysed by venom and cocooned by a net and barbed legs before they ever hit the wet rock.

This was child control of the severest kind.

But as Gorman watched them fall, his fear subsided. He'd caught a glimpse of something he didn't like, and he didn't want to see it again.