One Drop

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Ruled Britannia

This book is part of a triptych of novels: three separate stories all taking place in the same imagined world. *Three Bullets* by Melvin Burgess, *The Second Coming* by Tariq Mehmood, as well as my own book, *One Drop*, all take place in the UK as it might be in the near future.

Thanks to Tariq and Melvin for the notes, for indulging my late-night agonising, and for the laughs. This worldbuilding has been a four-year rollercoaster journey, and I wouldn't change one bit.

You can find more about the Triptych on our Facebook page
https://www.facebook.com/RuledBritannia/
Or at www.ruledbritannia.net

To Fereshteh.
For everything and all.

1

The Drawbridge

They forced us to the drawbridge, the guards circling tight around us. Low whimpers. Mud. The smell of rot. Pus. Someone retching. A blow from behind. Steel on bone. Dune, close to my side, was a mess: blood still running from the cut in the side of their head where the guards had struggled with the SIM chip so they drilled it in deeper. I knew I had a chip drilled into my skull too, behind the sewn skin flap. All of us did.

The guard by me eased off a little, passing round a cigarette.

I took the chance.

'Hey, Dune.'

Dune looked up. Their eyes blotchy, the flesh around the sockets swollen.

'Hang in there. I got you.'

Dune nodded, took a breath that was a sigh too and their hand reached for my shoulder. Squeezed.

We were huddled together, about forty of us. Outside the Interrogation and Reception centre, facing the drawbridge and the moat. Shouts ahead. A scuffle, then a blur of rags and a woman fell into the mud. She was dragged up by guards and shoved back among us.

In my ear, whispers: 'I want to wake up.'

'You are awake,' I tell Dune.

Dune shivered. They'd slipped their hand into mine and now pressed it hard enough to hurt my knuckles.

A whine of hydraulics, then a shadow in the sky which clanged and spread. The drawbridge was lowering. Its draught flung up smells: burned diesel. Concrete dust. Muck. The vibrations made the moat water churn and spit. Somewhere among all this, the barking of dogs. I was dizzy. For a moment I saw nothing, only a bird wheeling in the white sky.

The bridge clanked level on the concrete lip and the first gate trundled back. Shouts. The bridge juddered as we were escorted onto it, then made to move across. Dune's left foot was dragging and they were making a keening sound like the noise of the wind in the fence. I took Dune's weight on my shoulder. My tongue was swollen. I put a hand up to the painful side of my head and brought my fingers to my eyes. Flakes of dried blood, like rust off an old motorbike wheel.

The second gate drew near. A crane above us shifted. Rain had turned the paper masks of the guards a darker blue and some flung them off. They started pushing us from the round huddle we'd become back into a crocodile line. Handheld scanners read our head SIM chips and the guards shouted out our numbers to each other, pairing us off.

'Number?'

'One.'

'Number?'

'Two.'

Pair.

'Number?'

'Three.'

'Number?'

'Four.'

Pair.

'Number?'

We were way down the line. I looked to the ground. The drawbridge's steel. A dragonfly drowning in the sphere of a raindrop. A scanner pressed into my head.

'Number?' the scan guard shouted.

'Twenty-seven!'

Dune was next in line.

'Number?'

'Twenty-nine!'

'No!'

They held Dune's sides and clicked and clicked on the scanner, knocking it into Dune's head. Dune barely flinched. The guard squinted, read off Dune's chip again.

'Number?'

'Twenty-eight!'

Pair.

'Number?'

The count continued till forty-four. Then finally, we were done.

Above us, the crane adjusted. A loudhailer called out: *'All Paired. Peace Committee, take over!'*

The second gate retracted in another burst of hydraulics. We shuffled into the camp, Dune's breathing heavy. The wind ripping into the rags of our clothes.

A brown-faced man in a silver wig and cassock stepped forward. He was waving a white rag on a stick above his head as he bowed to the guards.

'I am Dolphus of the Peace Committee. We thank you for these new additions. The sky is blue and every day is new.'

I saw the spasm of his head, his rictus grin, as he said, *The sky is blue*.

'And?' a guard said.

'And I have one drop of white blood, and that is the drop I worship.'

The guards retreated. The gate clanged behind them, then, seconds later, there came a backdraught as the drawbridge rose up, trapping us inside.

Dolphus had a team of orderlies and they handed us water in bottles and herded us across grass fields, along tarmac pathways and through a city of tents that had UNHRC lettering on them. We stopped at the largest tent. Inside, at the front of the tent, there was a pull-up banner:

Welcome to
ERAC: Evangelical Realignment Centre
Stay blessed

Inside, other signs were strung up. Rows of wooden benches. Dune was twitching. We shuffled along a bench and sat. At the front, Dolphus started waving jazz hands in the air, pacing and humming. A row of people sat behind him, looking like a starved church choir, their black, brown and white faces circled by bleached white ruffs. They joined in with Dolphus' jazz hands and hums. Slowly the tent went quiet, the hums faded to nothing, and Dolphus started talking, arms high and palms up, like a preacher. I tried to tune in but most of what he said was lost to the pain spreading from my head to my body.

'What fresh hell is this?' muttered Dune. Then, 'Ax, you OK?'

I nodded.

Dolphus' voice rang out across the heaving tent. He'd been talking a while and still had flow.

'. . . so between the fences, the moat, the guard dogs, you can forget about escaping. The SIM chips they have drilled in our heads explode if they are tampered with and can track you day and night, twenty-four-seven. If you try anything, they send in the Scavengers to hunt you down. You don't want to meet the Scavengers.'

I couldn't listen any more. I called out to him from the benches: 'Is this a prison?'

'This is a camp. You are in a scientific experiment. We are here because they want to test these chips in our heads. The chips are designed to make us model citizens in the new world that the Brotherhood of the Blood of Jesus are creating for us. The Bloods are gifting us a new, purer world.'

'What does that mean?' someone else shouted.

'Every night, drones fly over and activate our SIM chips to give us fresh memories and clean our thoughts. Make us all holier.'

Murmurs. Shouts. Dolphus raised his voice in reassurance. 'All *wrong* history will be wiped from your minds. All false thoughts. You will enter a brave new world. I myself am almost there and I can see it. Clean. White. Beautiful. We are blessed.'

The choir behind him began humming and finger-snapping. Dolphus' face went into rapture.

I took in another pull-up banner:

NO-GOOD REBELS
The Pankhursts
Alan Turing
Marilyn Monroe
Amy Winehouse

'Look,' I whispered to Dune, and flicked my eyes at the banner. '*Monroe*. What's she up there for?'

'She was a civil rights sister, back in the day,' mumbled Dune. Then, 'This is freaky, Ax.'

'You can say that again. Totally wack.'

A litter picker was moving robotically around and between the rows. He had been glancing at me since I stood and asked the first question. Now our eyes met. He clenched his fist at his waist. Defiance and challenge flashed across his face. Then he pivoted away and his face was a black mask again.

'The drones will be above tonight and will start their work on you. Stay in your assigned tents. Do not cause trouble. Resistance is harmful. There are shadowy people in the camp. Trouble-causers. They want to fight the Bloods and break out of here. We cannot fight the Bloods, any more than we can stop rain from falling. Or push back the sea. Let's celebrate this new world we are entering, instead of battling it. By joining the winning side, we all become winners. The Bloods' victory is close. They are building a new England, and it will be a shimmering bright thing, a shining city on a hill . . .'

I looked around. Few people outside his choir were listening. We were cold and tired and in pain. We needed clothes to replace our rags. And food. And sleep.

'Today is a special day. You are so lucky. This week, there will be a magnificent parade with top Blood VIPs in attendance . . .'

Dolphus kept on about the parade. I read another of the pull-up banners at the end of a tent walkway.

HEROES
Francis Drake

Sir Walter Raleigh
Edward Colston
William Shakespeare

'. . . remain two to a tent according to your pairings. It is crucial to stay in place overnight. If the night drones find you out of place when they come over for roll call, they will destroy you.'

A stench of sick and stale clothes filled the tent. Along the rows, some sat bolt upright and alert, others were slumped and had their faces buried in their arms, or else had shoved their hands into their mouths. I read another sign.

NO-GOOD NEGROES
Malcolm X
Angela Davis
Martin Luther King Jr

A low moan that may have started with one person but was now a general noise from the benches filled the tent. It was edged with rebellion and fuelled on hunger and pain. Dune began muttering curses. My eyesight was fading, and I didn't know if the fade was caused by the SIM chip or exhaustion.

'It's time to eat!' announced Dolphus with a clap that startled the slumberers.

A cauldron arrived, carried in through a tent flap by two figures in chefs' chequered trousers. They hoiked it onto a metal table.

There was a rumble of tilting benches and a stumble of bodies towards the food. Bowls appeared and the orderlies began ladling it out. Me and Dune forced our way through the scrum and grabbed

some. It was hot green slop that smelled of cabbage. We wrestled out of the scrum and sat on a bench to eat. Music tinkled inside the tent. And slogans. Voices of all ages, all joyous.

I love being here.

My mum and dad sent me a letter.

Well done.

I feel good here.

Life's great at camp.

Living here is fun.

Good food, fresh water, nice guards.

Don't be scared. This is beautiful.

The sky is newly blue and I can be reborn too.

We paid the piped-in words no mind. We ate.

Suddenly a red glow lit the tent. Then came a thud. To our left, something wet shot up, hitting the slopes of the tent's peaked ceiling and sliding down its sides. Grey and red, becoming pink where it blended. I looked back and saw a body, blood flowing freely from the side of the now-incomplete head. Screams. Howls.

'I warned you!' Dolphus roared above the din. 'Some fool has tried to remove their head chip! Never try that! Stay calm!'

Peace Committee orderlies rushed to the body and lifted it up.

Memories lurched up. *Mum. Blood. Dad. Blood. The Commander. Blood.* Everything blurred.

When I opened my eyes again, Dune was stroking my face. 'What the fuck,' I whispered to them.

People took their bowls back up and ate. The only sounds were those of spoons on bowls, the push of the wind on canvas, and the slip of the wetness down the tent's sides.

*

They gave us an arrival pack of blankets, tied with string and stuffed with things, and we were sectioned off into groups of eight. Each group had a flunky assigned to it and we had to follow them to the tent zone. Me and Dune trudged on. The pain in my skull was starting to wake up. Every footstep jolted. How the Bloods caught us was still heavy on my mind: Mum's guts on the tarmac. Dad's cry.

The *thunk* of a stave.

I broke from memory. Into this. Here. Now.

The coil-haired flunky escorting us was murmuring something rhymey as he thwacked a stave on his hand. Each thwack made his flunky robes billow.

'Blue eyes dream me away. Pray!'

Dune glanced to me, quizzical. I shrugged.

The paths were concrete, the land level all around. I saw a busted washing machine drum rolling like tumbleweed across low grass, the flattened remains of a military transporter. The nose cone of a fighter jet, its windows gone.

The sun was up. Smoke was blowing from the north from stubble burning somewhere too far off to see. It carried a tarry taste. Over to the east were clusters of bomb-busted low buildings and a long wide stretch of concrete that swirled left. A runway. The smoke thickened, cutting visibility. The grass underfoot was sodden. Still slapping the stave into his outstretched palm, the flunky was onto his next verse.

'White at last, white at last, thank God Almighty, I am white at last!'

In the corner of my eye, I saw a shadowy figure; they had been steadily following us as we walked with the flunky. I turned my

head, looked, let them know I saw them. The litter-picker guy. He nodded to me but said nothing.

Shouts ahead. The smoke obscuring everything. We picked up pace.

Cries.

Ahead of us, someone fell under harsh blows. A flunky had her splayed out on the grass. I'd seen her before, in the reception tent. I recognised the pink hair ends. The moon face. The flunky was pressing a scanner to her skull with one hand, pounding her ribs with the butt-end of their stave with the other.

'Number?!'

'Thirty!'

'Number?!'

'Thirty!'

'Number?!'

Dune stumbled to go and help her, but fell. I hauled them up and together we ran to her. Our own flunky called us back. I made five leaps and me and Dune reached her and Dune flung themselves at the flunky and I tried to follow but the pain from my wounds wiped me out. I came round to the sight of scattering feet. Flunkies all about, protecting the one standing over the girl.

'You no-good negroes.'

I got up. Dune clung to the girl with the pink hair. I kneeled down to her. Tears budded in her eyes. I brushed hair from her face.

The shadow man came over and said something to the girl that I couldn't follow because a flaring pain tore through my head, like the SIM chip in my skull was threatening to burst. I waited. The pain dimmed. Then the shadow man was whispering to Dune, '. . .

understand? You did good, but not now.' He was holding Dune, who was on their haunches, blinking back rage and confusion.

The girl stood up.

The flunky we'd wrestled with brushed his robes down. He had his scanner back in his hand and was standing in front of the girl with it once more.

'Number?'

Everyone tensed. The girl had to have clocked the controls on the flunky's scanner because she pointed to it and said to the flunky: 'Run update. Press settings. Then tools. Tools. Then update. OK?'

Somehow, whatever she said got through to the flunky. A glimmer of recognition. He fiddled with the scanner. Then pressed it to her head again.

'Number . . . thirty.'

'Like I said,' said the girl.

'Move now.'

The flunky's gaze landed on the shadow man.

'What are you?'

'I'm a no-good negro.'

The flunky nodded and moved on.

The shadow man whispered to us. 'Get back with your group. Go to your tent and rest up. I'll call. We got business.'

'Why were you following us?'

'Tomorrow we can talk. Now go. Conform. Before they mark you.'

And the shadow man disappeared into smoke.

We rejoined our group of eight waiting by the edge of the path with our own flunky, still murmuring his song about blue eyes.

Minutes later we arrived at the tent field. Row after row of grey, A-frame canvas tents. Numbers on the side. Our flunky assigned the tents by number. Me and Dune were allocated the third tent in the sixteenth row, four back from the main path. The field extended way beyond our pitch. The Bloods had plenty of spare capacity.

When the flunky left, we undid the tent flaps and went in. The air inside was musty, the light dim. Dune took the left side and we unpacked.

'The girl,' Dune said. 'Why did that litter dude say "not now"?'

The question hung in the air.

We were unpacking the bundles. A rough blanket. Inside the blanket, a thin foam mat and a small cube of foam for a pillow. A camping stove and a gas canister the size of your hand. Matches. A tube of cotton wadding. An electric lamp. A pot. A silver foil pack of mixed edible seeds and another of rice grains. Dried noodles. Some flavour sachets. A zippered green pack with a white cross on it. Inside the green pack, antiseptic wipes, a tube of cream, a small plastic bottle of iodine, one bandage roll.

'Yeah. Who was that guy? "We got business."'

We laughed. Even though it pained our heads to do it.

'What was he whispering to you, Dune?'

As I'd held the girl's head in my hands, I'd seen them talking.

'He told me drones will fly over tonight and knock us out, you know, make us fall asleep. Be ready.' Dune was lying on their foam now. 'Lucky us.' Then, 'This is bad, right?'

'Can't be worse than what we went through when the Bloods stopped the car.'

'Don't talk about that.'

I rolled out my own foam. Dune had their head propped on an elbow, watching me; they were moody, else the head wound was giving them a headache. A sheen of sweat sat on their forehead.

'Come to Ax, Dune, babes. Your head hurts?'

Dune nodded. They pulled my arms closer around them.

'If I could rewind time,' I said with Dune in my arms, 'I'd have made sure we never took that road. And you wouldn't have been in the car.'

'If they'd known me and you were Resistance, they'd have shot us straight off instead of toying with us.'

'What they did to you, Dune . . .'

'Don't.'

I let Dune roll onto me and their face pressed into mine. They kissed me and then rested their head on my shoulder. Their breathing slowed.

'I don't think they put moisturiser in the Welcome Pack,' Dune murmured after a while.

'Natch. Not even cocoa butter. What we meant to do?'

'The big zit here always erupts and ruins the profile of my chin.'

I smiled to myself. After all the shit we had been through, they obsessed on that. That was Dune.

Outside, children were playing and something about the weird joy in their shouts had us stir, even though we were tired. We peeked our heads out of the flaps. Three kids in busted-up shoes were kicking a can. Another kid was pretend-flying near a tent where a mother cradled a floppy baby, the mother whimpering, an older child leaning into her, crying. Someone walked past, their lips sucking at a scrunched plastic bottle of milky water.

Wind pushed through the camp, making ropes and canvas

groan. It flexed the grass, so it showed silver green then glossy green then back to silver; and the air flow lifted up smells of soil, piss and oil, and made swirling eddies of dust and debris. Then the grass turned to grey and the children vanished and the sunlight dimmed to darkness and heavy grey settled over everything.

'There's no stars up there,' Dune said. We were still at the entrance to the tent.

'There are,' I replied. 'Always. It's just sometimes we can't see them.'

Someone was singing happily in a deep voice not far from us.

'. . . this valley of mine!
Oh, Bloods! You're so divine!'

'What the fuck?' Dune whispered.

I shrugged. 'At least he holds the tune.'

The warbler stopped. Lights began to extinguish from inside tents, cooking stoves *phutted* out all around us, and soon it was if the other tents were no longer there and we were alone in the black. A hum of engines overhead in the air. A klaxon. The drones. Moving overhead. We braced. My skin pricked.

Then I was gone.