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Un Lun Dun

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China Mieville

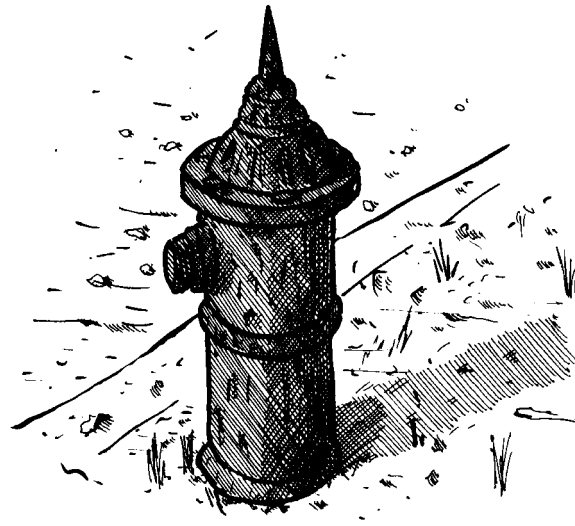
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TO OSCAR



In an unremarkable room, in a nondescript building, a man sat working on very non-nondescript theories.

The man was surrounded by bright chemicals in bottles and flasks, charts and gauges, and piles of books like battlements around him. He propped them open on each other. He cross-referred them, seeming to read several at the same time; he pondered, made notes, crossed the notes out, went hunting for facts of history, chemistry and geography.

He was quiet but for the scuttling of his pen and his occasional murmurs of revelation. He was obviously working on something very difficult. From his mutters and the exclamation marks he scrawled though, he was slowly making progress.

The man had travelled a very long way to do the work he was doing. He was so engrossed it took him a long time to notice that the light around him was fading unnaturally fast.

Some sort of darkness was closing in on the windows. Some sort of silence – more than the absence of noise, the presence *of a predatory quiet – was settling around him.*

The man looked up at last. Slowly he put down his pen and turned around in his chair.

'Hello?' he said. 'Professor? Is that you? Is the minister here . . . ?'

There was no answer. The light from the corridor still faded. Through the smoked glass of the door, the man could see darkness taking shape. He stood, slowly. He sniffed, and his eyes widened.

Fingers of smoke were wafting under the door, entering the room. They uncoiled from the crack like feelers.

'So . . .' the man whispered. 'So, it's you.'

There was no answer, but from beyond the door came a very faint rumble that might just have been laughter.

The man swallowed, and stepped back. But he set his face. He watched as the smoke came more thickly around the edges of the door, eddying towards him. He reached for his notes. He moved quickly, dragging a chair as quietly as he could into place below a high ventilation duct. He looked afraid but determined – or determined but afraid.

The smoke kept coming. Before he had a chance to climb, there was another rumble-laugh-noise. The man faced the door.



PART ONE

ZANNA AND DEEBA

1
THE RESPECTFUL FOX

There was no doubt about it: there was a fox behind the climbing frame. And it was watching.

'It is, isn't it?'

The playground was full of children, their grey uniforms flapping as they ran and kicked balls into makeshift goals. Amid the shouting and the games, a few girls were watching the fox.

'It definitely is. It's just watching us,' a tall blonde girl said. She could see the animal clearly behind a fringe of grass and thistle. 'Why isn't it moving?' She walked slowly towards it.

At first the friends had thought the animal was a dog and had started ambling towards it while they chatted. But halfway across the tarmac they had realized it was a fox.

It was a cold cloudless autumn morning and the sun was bright. None of them could quite believe what they were seeing. The fox kept standing still as they approached.

'I saw one once before,' whispered Kath, shifting her bag from shoulder to shoulder. 'I was with my dad by the canal. He told me there's loads in London now, but you don't normally see them.'

'It should be running,' said Keisha anxiously. 'I'm staying here. That's got teeth.'

'All the better to eat you with,' said Deeba.

'That was a wolf,' said Kath.

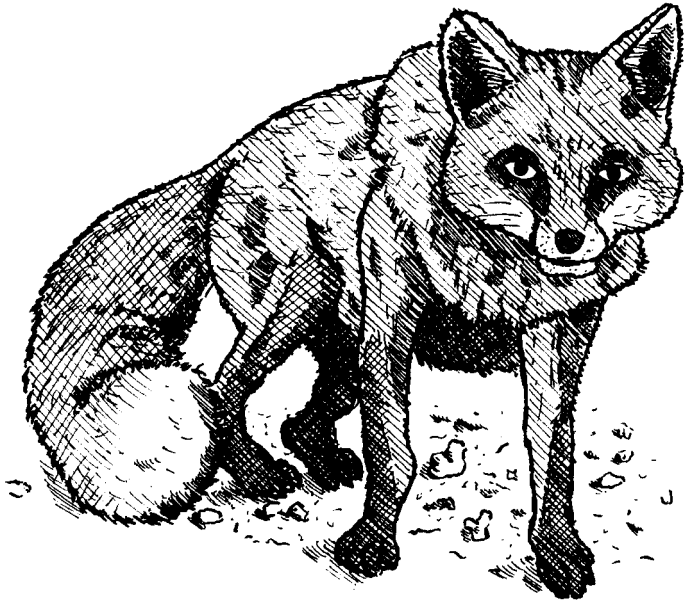
Kath and Keisha held back: Zanna, the blonde girl, slowly approached the fox, with Deeba, as usual, by her side. They got closer, expecting it to arch into one of those beautiful curves of animal panic and duck under the fence. It kept not doing so.

The girls had never seen any animal so still. It wasn't that it wasn't moving: it was furiously not-moving. By the time they got close to the climbing frame they were creeping exaggeratedly, like cartoon hunters.

The fox eyed Zanna's outstretched hand politely. Deeba frowned.

'Yeah, it is watching,' Deeba said. 'But not us. It's watching you.'

★



Zanna – she hated her name Susanna, and she hated 'Sue' even more – had moved to the estate about a year ago. On her way to Kilburn Comprehensive on her first day, Deeba had made Zanna laugh, which not many people could do. Since then, where Zanna was, Deeba tended to be too. There was something about Zanna that drew attention. She was decent-to-good at things like sports, schoolwork, dancing, whatever, but that wasn't it; she did well enough to do well, but never enough to stand out. She was tall and striking, but she never played that up either; if anything, she seemed to try to stay in the background. But she never quite could. If she hadn't been easy to get on with, that could have caused her trouble.

Sometimes even her mates were a little bit wary of Zanna, as if they weren't quite sure how to deal with her. Even Deeba herself had to admit that Zanna could be a bit dreamy. Sometimes she would sort of zone out, staring skywards or losing the thread of what she was saying.

Just at that moment, however, she was concentrating hard on what Deeba had just said.

Zanna put her hands on her hips, and even her sudden movement didn't make the fox jump.

'It's true,' said Deeba. 'It hasn't taken its eyes off you.'

Zanna met the fox's gentle vulpine stare. All the girls watching, and the animal, seemed to get lost in something.

. . . Until their attention was interrupted by the bell for the end of break. The girls looked at each other, blinking.

The fox finally moved. Still looking at Zanna, it bowed its head. It did it once, then leaped up and was gone.

Deeba watched Zanna and muttered, 'This is just getting weird.'

2
SIGNS

For the rest of that day Zanna tried to avoid her friends. They eventually caught up with her in the lunch queue, but when she told them to leave her alone it was in such a nasty voice that they obeyed.

'Forget it,' said Kath. 'She's just rude.'

'She's mad,' said Becks, and they walked away ostentatiously. Only Deeba stayed.

She didn't try to talk to Zanna. Instead she watched her thoughtfully.

That afternoon she waited for Zanna after school. Zanna tried to get by in the rush, but Deeba wouldn't let her. She crept up on her, then suddenly linked an arm into one of hers. Zanna tried to look angry, but it didn't last very long.

'Oh, Deebs . . . what's going on?' she said.

They made their way to the estate where they both lived and headed for Deeba's house. Her boisterous, talkative family, while sometimes exasperating with all their noise and kerfuffle, were generally a comfortable backdrop for any discussion. As usual, people looked at the girls as they passed. They made a funny pair. Deeba was shorter and rounder and messier than her skinny friend. Her long

black hair was making its usual break for freedom from her ponytail, in contrast to Zanna's tightly slicked-back blondeness. Zanna was silent while Deeba kept asking her if she was OK.

'Hello, Miss Resham; hello, Miss Moon,' sang Deeba's father as they entered. 'What have you been doing? Cup of tea for you, ladies?'

'Hi, sweetheart,' said Deeba's mum. 'How was your day? Hello, Zanna, how you doing?'

'Hello, Mr and Mrs Resham,' said Zanna, smiling with her usual nervous pleasure as Deeba's parents beamed at her. 'Fine, thank you.'

'Leave her alone, Dad,' said Deeba, dragging Zanna through to her room. 'Except for the tea, please.'

'So, nothing happened to you today,' said her mother. 'You have nothing to report. You had a totally empty day! You amaze me.'

'It was *fine*,' she said. 'It was same as always, innit?'

Without getting up, Deeba's parents started loudly consoling her about the tragedy of how nothing ever changed for her and every day was the same. Deeba rolled her eyes at them and closed her door.

They sat without speaking for a while. Deeba put on lip-gloss. Zanna just sat.

'What we going to do, Zanna?' said Deeba at last. 'Something's going on.'

'I know,' said Zanna. 'It's getting worse.'

It was hard to say exactly when it had all started. Things had been getting strange for at least a month.

'Remember when I saw that cloud?' said Deeba. 'That looked like you?'

'That was weeks ago, and it didn't look anything like anything,' Zanna said. 'Let's stick to real stuff. The fox

today. And that woman. What was on the wall. And the letter. That sort of thing.'

It had been early autumn when the odd events had started to occur. They had been in the Rose Cafe.

None of them had paid any attention when the door opened until they realized that the woman who'd come in was standing quietly by their table. One by one they looked at her.

She'd been wearing a bus driver's uniform, the cap at a perky angle. She was grinning.

'Sorry to butt in,' the woman said. 'I hope you don't . . . Just very exciting to meet you.' She smiled at all of them but addressed Zanna. 'Just wanted to say that.'

The girls stared in dumb astonishment for several seconds. Zanna had tried to stutter some reply, Kath had burst out with 'What . . . ?' and Deeba had started laughing. None of this fazed the woman. She said a nonsense word.

'Shwazzy!' she said. 'I heard you'd be here, but I wouldn't have believed it.' With one more smile she walked away, leaving the girls laughing nervously and loudly until the waitress had asked them to calm down.

'Nutter!'

'Nutter!'

'Bloody *nutter*!'

If that had been all, it would have just been one of those stories about someone a bit loopy on London streets. But that had not been all.

Some days later Deeba had been with Zanna, walking under the old bridge over Iverson Road. She'd looked up, reading some of the cruder graffiti. There behind the pigeon net, far higher than anyone could have reached, was painted in vivid yellow: ZANNA FOR EVER!



'Cor! Someone else called Zanna,' Deeba said. 'Or you've got long arms. Or someone massive loves you, Zann.'

'Shut up,' Zanna said.

'It's true though,' Deeba said. 'No one else's called Zanna, you're always saying. Now you've made your mark.'

A little while after that, the day after Guy Fawkes Night, when London was full of bonfires and fireworks, Zanna had come to school upset.

A postman had been waiting outside her front door. He had given her a letter with no name on the envelope, just handed it straight to her as soon as she had emerged, and disappeared. She had hesitated before showing it to Deeba.

'Don't tell any of the others,' she had said. 'Swear?'

We look forward to meeting you, Deeba read, *when the wheel turns.*

'Who's it from?' Deeba said.

'If I knew that I wouldn't be freaked out. And there's no stamp.'

'Is there a mark?' Deeba said. 'To say where it came from? Is that a *U*? An *L*? And that says . . . *on*, I think.' They couldn't read any more.

'He said something to me,' Zanna said. 'The same thing

that woman did. "Shwazzy," he said. I was like, "What?" I tried to follow him, but he was gone.'

'What does it mean?' Deeba said.

'That's not all,' said Zanna. 'This was in there too.'

It was a little square of card, some strange design, a beautiful, intricate thing of multicoloured swirling lines. It was, Deeba had realized, some mad version of a London travelcard. It said it was good for zones one to six, buses and trains, all across the city.

On the dotted line across its centre was carefully printed: ZANNA MOON SHWAZZY.

That was when Deeba had told Zanna that she had to tell her parents. She herself had kept her promise and had never told anyone.

'Did you tell them?' said Deeba.

'How can I?' said Zanna. 'What am I going to say about the animals?'

For the last few weeks, dogs would often stop as Zanna walked by and stare at her. Once a little conga line of three squirrels had come down from a tree as Zanna sat in Queen's Park and one by one had put a little nut or seed in front of her. Only cats ignored her.

'It's mad,' said Zanna. 'I don't know what's going on. And I can't tell them. They'll think I need help. Maybe I do. But I tell you one thing.' Her voice was surprisingly firm. 'I was thinking it when I looked at that fox. At first I was scared. I still don't want to talk about it, not to Kath and that lot. So don't say nothing, alright? But I've had enough. Something's happening? OK. Well, I'm ready for it.'

Outside it was storming. The air was growling and rumbustious. People crammed under eaves or huddled into their coats and shuffled through the rain. Through Deeba's

window the girls watched people dance and wrestle with umbrellas.

When Zanna left, she ran out past a sheltering woman with a ridiculous little dog on a lead. As it saw her, the dog sat up in an oddly dignified way.

It bowed its head. Zanna looked at the little dog and, obviously as surprised by her own reaction as by the animal's greeting, bowed her head back.

3
THE VISITING SMOKE

The next day Zanna and Deeba wandered through the playground watching their reflections in all the puddles. Bedraggled rubbish lurked by walls. The clouds still looked heavy.

'My dad hates umbrellas,' said Deeba, swinging her own. 'When it rains he always says the same thing: "I do not believe the presence of moisture in the air is sufficient reason to overturn society's usual sensible taboo against wielding spiked clubs at eye level."'

From the edge of the playground, near where the respectful fox had stood, they could see over the school's walls into the street, where a few people passed by. Something caught Zanna's eye. Something strange and unclear. By a playing field at the end of the street, smudges were just visible on the road.

'There's something there,' said Zanna. She squinted. 'I think it's moving.'

'Is it?' said Deeba.

The sky seemed unnaturally flat, as if a huge grey sheet had been pegged out from horizon to horizon above them. The air was still. Very faint dark stains coiled and disappeared, and the road was unmarked again.

'Today . . .' Deeba said. 'It's not a normal day.'

Zanna shook her head.

Birds arced, and a clutch of sparrows flew out of nowhere and circled Zanna's head in a twittering halo.

That afternoon they had French. Zanna and Deeba were not paying attention, were staring out of the windows, drawing foxes and sparrows and rain clouds, until something in Miss Williams's droning made Zanna look up.

'. . . *choisir* . . .' she heard. '. . . *je choisis, tu choisis* . . .'

'What's she on about?' whispered Deeba.

'*Nous allons choisir* . . .' Miss Williams said. '*Vous avez choisi.*'

'Miss? Miss?' said Zanna. 'What was that last one, miss? What does it mean?'

Miss Williams poked the board.

'This one?' she said. '*Vous avez choisi. Vous*: you plural. *Avez*: have. *Choisi*: chosen.'

Choisi. Shwazzy. Chosen.

At the end of the day, Deeba and Zanna stood by the school gate and looked out at where they had seen the marks. Nothing unusual was visible, but they both felt some presence. It was still drizzling, and by the playing fields the rain looked to be falling as if against resistance, as if it had hit a patch of odd air.

'You coming to Rose's?' Kath and the others were standing behind them.

'We . . . thought we saw something,' Deeba said. 'We was just going to . . .'

Her voice petered out and she followed Zanna. Behind them a scrum of their classmates were rushing by, heading home or meeting their parents.

'What you looking for?' said Keisha. She and Kath were

watching quizzically as Zanna stood in the middle of the road a few metres away and looked around.

'I can't see nothing,' she whispered. Zanna stood for a long time, as the others huffed impatiently. 'Alright then,' she said, raising her voice. Kath had her arms folded and one eyebrow raised. 'Let's go.'

The stream of their classmates had ended. A few cars emerged from the gates and swept past them as their teachers headed home. The little group of girls was alone in the street. With a sputtering crack, the street lights came on as the sky darkened.

Rain was coming down hard like typewriter keys on Deeba's umbrella.

'. . . don't know what she's doing . . .' Deeba heard Becks saying to Keisha and Kath. Zanna walked a little ahead of them, her feet sending up little sprays of rain like mist.

A lot like mist, a dark mist. Zanna slowed. She and Deeba looked down.

'What now?' said Keisha in exasperation.

At their feet, a few centimetres above the dirty wet tarmac, there was a layer of coiling smoke.

'What . . . is that?' said Kath.

Wafts were rising from the gutters. The smoke was a horrible dirty dark. It emerged in drifts and tendrils, reaching through the metal grilles of the drains like growing vines or octopus legs. Ropes of it tangled and thickened. They coiled around the wheels of vehicles and under their engines.

'What's going on?' whispered Keisha. Smoke was beginning to boil out of the sewers. A smell of chemicals and rot thickened in the air. Far off and muffled as if by a curtain, the noise of a motor was audible.

Zanna was standing with her arms out, focusing intently

on sudden fumes that encircled them. For a second it looked as if the rain that was pelting them was evaporating, like drops on hot metal, a few millimetres above Zanna's head. Deeba stared, but dark drifts hid her friend.

The motor was louder. A car was approaching.

The girls were shrouded in gritty smoke. They spluttered in panic and tried to call to each other. They could see almost nothing.

The noise of the motor grew, and glints of reflected streetlamp-light winked momentarily through the fumes.

'Wait a minute,' Zanna shouted.

Through the fog headlights suddenly flared, heading straight for Zanna. Deeba saw her, turned into a shadow, sidestepping neatly as the lights bore down, her hands seeming to glow.

'It's my dad!' Zanna shouted, and moved fast as the car raced into the smoke, and there was a rush as the fumes dissipated and—

there was a bang, and something went flying, and there was silence.

The clouds undarkened and the rain stopped. The strange fumes dropped out of the air and flooded like thick dark water back into the gutters, gushing soundlessly out of sight.

For several seconds no one moved.

A car was skewed across the road, with Zanna's dad sitting in the front seat looking confused. Someone was shouting hysterically. Someone fair was lying by a wall. 'Zanna!' Deeba shouted, but Zanna was beside her. It was Becks who had been hit and who lay motionless.

'We have to get a doctor,' said Zanna, pulling out her mobile and starting to cry, but Kath was already through to 999.

Zanna's dad staggered out of the car, coughing.

'What . . . what . . . ?' he said. 'I was . . . what happened?' He saw Becks. 'Oh my God!' He dropped to his knees beside her. 'What did I do?' he kept saying.

'I've called an ambulance,' Kath said, but he wasn't listening. Now the light was back to normal and there was no fog lapping at ankle height, people were peering out of doors and windows. Becks moved uneasily and made groggy moaning noises.

'What happened?' Zanna's dad kept asking them. None of them knew what to say. 'I don't remember anything,' he said. 'I just woke up and—'

'It hurts . . .' Becks wailed.

'Did you see?' Zanna whispered to Deeba. Her voice sounded as if it was cracking. 'The smoke, the car, everything? It was all thick around me. It was trying to get *me*.'

4
THE WATCHER IN THE NIGHT

That night, and the two that followed, Zanna stayed over at Deeba's house. Just then she preferred it to her own place across the yard of the estate.

Her father was in a bit of a state. The police kept asking him to tell his story again and telling him there was no sign of the 'chemical spill' he thought might explain the smoke that had made him light-headed. While he had to deal with the questions, Mr and Mrs Moon gratefully accepted the Reshams' suggestion that Zanna stay with them.

The police had also asked the girls what had happened, of course, but Zanna and Deeba couldn't explain what they didn't understand.

'She's had a real shock, Mrs Resham,' Deeba heard one officer say. 'She's not making a bit of sense.'

'We have to make them believe us,' Zanna insisted.

'What?' said Deeba. '"Magic smoke came out of the drains." Think that'll help?'

Becks had broken a couple of bones, but was recovering. So, at least, Zanna and Deeba understood. Becks herself wouldn't speak to them. She wouldn't see them when they came to the hospital, nor would she answer her phone.

And it wasn't just her. Kath and Keisha ignored Zanna and Deeba at school and wouldn't answer their calls either.

'They're blaming me for what happened,' Zanna said to Deeba in a strange voice.

'They're scared,' Deeba said. The two girls were sitting up late in Deeba's room, Zanna in the fold-out bed.

'And they're blaming *me*,' Zanna said. 'And . . . maybe they're right.'

In the next room the Reshams shouted at the television.

'Idiots!' Deeba's mother was saying.

'They're all fools,' her dad said. 'Except that Environment woman, Rawley, she's alright. She's the only one does any good . . .'

The Reshams were still having the conversation – the same one they had had many times about which politicians they disliked most and, the much more rare species, which they liked (a shortlist of one) – much later, when they went to bed. Zanna and Deeba were still whispering.

'It must have been an accident,' Deeba said. 'Something with the pipes maybe.'

'They said it wasn't,' Zanna said. 'And anyway . . . you don't believe that. It's something else. Something to do with . . .' *With me*, was what she didn't say but what they both knew she meant.

They had the same conversation every day. There were no conclusions they could come to, but there was nothing else they could talk about either. They talked themselves out and eventually fell asleep.

Later, in the small hours of the night, Deeba woke quite suddenly. She sat up in her bed by the window and pulled aside the curtains a little to look out across the estate and try to work out what had disturbed her.

She watched for a long time. Occasionally a figure might hurry by, following the tiny red glimmer of a cigarette end. At this time of night though, the concrete square, the big metal bins, the walkways were mostly empty.

On the other side of the yard she could see Zanna's house, its windows dark. The wind turned corkscrews in the courtyard, and Deeba watched bits of rubbish turn. It was raining a little. The moon glinted in puddles. In the far corner was a pile of full black rubbish bags.

There was a tiny scratching sound.

Deeba thought it must be a cat, searching in the rubbish. There was quiet except for the fingertip drumming of rain and the whisper of waste paper. Then she heard it again, an insistent *skritch-skritch.*

'Zanna,' she whispered, shaking her friend awake, 'listen.'

The two girls looked out into the darkness.

In the shadows by the bins something was moving. A wet black shape, rooting in the plastic. It moved towards the light. It didn't look like a cat, nor a crow, nor a lost dog. It was long and spindly and flapping, all at once.

It extended a limb out of the shadows. Something glinting and black fluttered. Zanna and Deeba held their breath.

Shaking with effort, the claw-wing-thing hauled itself through the shadows, spidery and bedraggled. It approached Zanna's house. It huddled in the dark by the wall, leaped up suddenly, and hung below the window.

The two girls gasped. The thing was just visible now in the faint lamplight. It was an umbrella.

For a long time it hung like some odd fruit below the window sill, while the rain increased, until the watching friends began to tell themselves that they had imagined the motion, that there had been an umbrella hooked on

the ledge for hours. Then the dark little thing moved again.

It dropped and crawled with its excruciating slowness back to the darkness. It opened its canopy a little way, gripped the concrete with a metal point and dragged itself along. It was bent, or battered, or bent and battered, or torn, and it crawled like something injured, into the shadows and out of sight.

The courtyard was empty. Deeba and Zanna looked at each other.

'Oh . . . my . . . God . . .' whispered Zanna.

'That was . . .' squeaked Deeba. 'Was that an *umbrella*?'

'How's that possible . . . ?' Zanna said. 'And what was it doing by my window?'

