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Opening extract from

Fever Crumb

Written by

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1

The Girl From Godshawk's Head

That morning they were making paper boys. Fever had gone down at dawn to the pressing room to collect fourteen of the big, furled sheets of paper, six feet square, which Dr Isbister made by pulping and pressing foolish old books which his library did not need. Then she had carried them carefully back up the winding wooden stairways of the Head to the chambers which she shared with Dr Crumb. There they had set to work.

Fever was just the right size now to lie on each sheet while Dr Crumb drew an outline all round her with his pencil. When that was done, she fetched two pairs of paper shears, and they carefully cut out the silhouettes. Soon fourteen of her blank, white

selves lay stacked on the workbench. Fever stood at Dr Crumb's side, watching but not speaking while he spread out one of the cut-outs and laid a thin wire skeleton on top of it. He took care over the hands, with their complicated little mechanisms, and the dim white metal discs, like flimsy coins, which were the paper boys' eyes and brain. These were old-world mechanisms, and if they were damaged they could never be replaced, for no one knew the secrets of their making any more; they had been recycled from one generation of paper boys to the next ever since the Scriven first brought them down out of the unknown north.

When all the mechanisms were correctly positioned, Fever helped Dr Crumb to coat the paper figure with paste. Then together they took a second cut-out and stuck it precisely over the first, so that the two cut-outs formed a Fever-shaped paper sandwich with the metal parts hidden inside. Together, they carried it to the bath which stood in a corner of the room, and laid it in the solution. At first the paper boy just floated on the surface, like a dead leaf on a pond, but Fever took rubber-tipped tongs and gently pressed it down until the solution flowed over it and it sank. While Dr Crumb set to work on the next paper boy, Fever

got her fingers under the edge of the bath and tilted it gently up and down, up and down, so that the solution shifted but did not spill, and the paper boy slid to and fro under the surface, his head and feet banging alternately against the ends of the bath.

Fever thought that it would be more rational to call the device a paper *girl*, since it had been drawn around her, but Dr Crumb said that it was not alive and had no gender.

"So why are they called paper boys?"

"A good point, Fever. The name is foolish, and was clearly not invented by a man of reason."

When all seven paper boys had been made and soaked, they lifted them out of the bath one by one and held them up so that the excess solution could drain off. Then, carrying the dripping figures on a rack between them, they left the workroom and went up the stairs and out on to the roof.

"This is a great waste of time," said Dr Crumb, as they pegged the paper boys out like laundry for the brisk west wind to dry. "Why the New Council do not just ask their Master of Devices to make paper boys for them, I fail to undersand. Master Wormtimber was once a member of our Order, and

surely he cannot have forgotten *everything* he learned from us . . ."

"Perhaps the New Council knows you make them best, Dr Crumb," said Fever loyally. "And maybe they want paper boys they can be sure of, if there is really to be a war."

"There is not going to be a war," said Dr Crumb.

"But Dr Isbister told me that a nomad horde is approaching from the north—"

"As our Order's librarian, it is one of Dr Isbister's duties to read the city newspapers, and I'm afraid they fill his mind with rumours and scaremongery. This is not the first time one of the nomad empires has moved south. They will not dare to attack London. Though if they did, I doubt that a few paper boys could do much to stop them."

The drying Paper Boys flapped and crockled, a line of white dancers strung between two ventilator cowls. Specks of rust and dust blew against them and stuck to the still-wet paper, so Fever and Dr Crumb went to and fro patiently picking them off. After a while, as the boys began to dry, Dr Crumb went back below, leaving Fever to keep an eye on them. She walked to the roof's edge and lay down, enjoying the warmth of the sun. It was July, the

height of London's brief summer. Bees droned past her, and the cries of hawkers came up faintly from the deep streets, where she could see people and carts and sedan chairs moving, while cows and goats grazed the weed-grown spoil-heaps of old scavenger digs, which stood like huge molehills between the buildings. Jackdaws called and squabbled around the strange old blue metal towers in Clerkenwell: wind-trams under their clouds of sunlit sail went rattling along their spindly viaducts. And somewhere beneath her, more as a vibration in her breastbone than an actual sound, Fever could hear the voices of old Dr Collihole and his assistants as they laboured in his attic workspace, assembling the vast paper balloon in which he planned one day soon to begin the reconquest of the skies.

Fever was the youngest member of the Order of Engineers, and the only female. Engineers did not have wives or children. But one evening fourteen years before, Dr Crumb had been called out to a dig on the Brick Marsh by an archaeologist named Chigley Unthank who wanted an opinion on some Ancient artefacts which he'd unearthed, and on his way back he had heard crying coming from an old

weed-grown pit close to the road. There, among the bramble bushes, he had found a baby in a basket, with an old blanket laid over her and a label tied around her wrist upon which someone had written just four words:

HER NAME IS FEVER.

He had told Fever the story often and often when she was little. (Dr Crumb did not believe in telling lies, not even white lies, not even to little girls. He had not wanted her to grow up thinking she was *his*.) She knew how he had stood there in the twilight staring down at the baby in the basket and how finally, not knowing what else to do, he had carried her back with him to Godshawk's Head.

In earlier years he might have taken her to the civic orphanage, but that was the summer of the Skinners' Riots, and the orphanage had been wrecked and looted, along with much of the rest of the city. In London's rougher boroughs, like Limehouse and St Kylie, the skins of murdered Scriven still flapped like speckled flags from poles which the Skinners had set up at street corners. The collection of merchants and lawyers who

called themselves the New Council had not yet completely restored order.

Dr Crumb made up a little bed for the foundling in a space drawer of his plan-chest and he fed her watered-down milk through a laboratory pipette. Looking into her eyes, he noticed that they were different colours; the left dark brown, the right soft lichen grey. Was that why she had been abandoned? Had her mother been afraid that her neighbours would take that small oddity for a sign that the child was a Scriven or some other sort of misshape, and kill her? There was a small wound on the back of her head; a thin cut not quite healed. Dr Crumb, who had seen for himself the savagery of the Skinners, imagined some crazed Londoner slashing at her with a knife . . .

The other Engineers, gathering round him to peer at the tiny refugee, had all agreed with him; the child must not go back to live among those savage, superstitious Londoners. She would stay with the Order, in Godshawk's Head, and Dr Crumb would act as her guardian. Girls had never been admitted to the Order before, since it was well known that female minds were not capable of rational thought. But if little Fever were to be brought up in the ways of the Order from infancy,

was there not a chance that she might make a useful Engineer?

So here she lay, fourteen summers later, in the sunshine on the Head's roof. She had grown into an odd-looking girl, and her clothes made her look odder still. Only someone who had spent fourteen years being told that appearances don't matter would dress in clothes like those. Big digger's boots, skinny black trousers, an old grey shirt, a white canvas coat with metal buttons. Then there was her hair, or rather, her *lack* of hair. The Order were keen to hurry humankind into the future, and they believed that hair was unnecessary. Fever shaved her head every other morning, and had done so for so long that she didn't remember what colour her hair would be if she were to let it grow. And below the bald dome of her head she had a curious face, with a short, sudden nose and a wide mouth, thick fair eyebrows and, oddest of all, those large eyes that didn't match. Yet somehow it all worked. It was one of those rare faces which bypassed pretty and went straight to beautiful.

Of course, that would never have occurred to Fever. She attached no importance to her looks.

But she *was* beautiful, all the same, as she lay there watching the city and waiting for the paper boys to dry and idly tracing the raised line of that old scar that she could feel but never see; a slender silvery thread which curved along the base of her skull.

2

An Offer of Employment

Godshawk's Head was not a building; it really was a head. Auric Godshawk, the last of London's Scriven overlords, had planned to commemorate his rule with an immense statue of himself, but he had got no further than this metal head, seven storeys high, which stood near Ox-fart Circus on a patch of waste ground surrounded by the huge, abandoned smelting and rolling sheds where it had been constructed.

The Scriven had arrived in London two hundred years before. Driven out of their northern homelands by some power shift among the nomad empires, they swept south in search of a city to

conquer, and London, rich in trade and archaeology, had drawn them like magpies. They were brilliant, cruel and party mad, and they were not exactly human. In the black centuries after the Downsizing all sorts of mutations had come whirling down the helter-skelter of the human DNA spiral, and the Scriven claimed to be a new species entirely. *Homo Superior* they liked to call themselves, or sometimes *Homo Futuris*, the idea being that they had come into the world to replace dull old *Homo Sapiens*. They were strange in a lot of ways you couldn't easily put your finger on, and in one way that you could: their pale skin was blotched and dappled with markings, like leopards' spots. Some Scriven's spots were freckle-coloured, others were dark as spilled ink. The Scriven prized dark markings most. They believed that they had each been written on by a god called the Scrivener, who had inscribed the future history of the world upon their skins. Scriven scholars spent whole lifetimes making drawings of other Scriven in the nude, and trying to decipher the Scrivener's sacred ideograms.

But like most mutant strains, the Scriven hadn't thrived for long. The genetic peculiarities of which they were so proud turned out to be their downfall.

All London's previous conquerors had intermarried with native Londoners and had children who were Londoners themselves, but although some Scriven took human wives and lovers, no children ever came of those unions. Even Scriven marriages were often barren. By the time Godshawk began work on his giant statue there were only a few hundred Scriven left, lording it over a city of sixty thousand. The taxes needed to pay for it, and the slave labour used in its building, helped spark the Skinners' Riots, in which Godshawk and all the other Scriven had been slaughtered.

The rioters had swirled all through London, burning and smashing anything connected with the Scriven, but they'd not been able to do much damage to that titanic head. When the smoke cleared it was still standing, its stern face dented and daubed with angry slogans.

There had been a housing shortage after the riots – the burning down of buildings, it turned out, had been a bad idea in a city made mostly of timber and thatch – and the unpopular Order of Engineers (who had taken no part in the uprising, and many of whose members had worked for Scriven masters) were thrown out of their big Guildhouse on Ludgate Hill to make room for

displaced families. It seemed logical that, rather than waiting for a new Guildhouse to be built while their valuable collections sat mouldering in makeshift huts, they should just move into Godshawk's Head. It was hollow, mostly weather-tight, and very big. The builders had left scaffolding inside which formed the basis of floors and walls and stairways. The Engineers glazed Godshawk's eyes, and poked dozens of smaller windows in his cheeks and forehead. They gave him a tar-paper roof like a bad hat. The Head was only intended to be a temporary accommodation, but it became permanent. After all, as the Engineers liked to joke in their dry, unfunny way, it was most appropriate that they should live in a head. Hadn't they always said that they were the brains of the city?

That night, when the paper boys had been taken down and packed in boxes and sent up to the Barbican, and Fever was washing up after the evening meal in the tiny kitchen which adjoined Dr Crumb's workspace, there came a tapping on the door. She put down the dish she had been wiping and reached for a towel to dry her hands, but Dr Crumb had already left his workbench and gone to

see who their visitor was. Fever could not see the door from where she stood in the kitchen, but she heard it open, and heard the voice of Dr Stayling.

What could have brought the Chief Engineer to their quarters at such a late hour Fever wondered. She was almost tempted to eavesdrop on what he and Dr Crumb were talking about, but she reminded herself to be reasonable. *There is no profit in wondering why Dr Stayling has come here,* she thought. *It may be nothing to do with you, Fever Crumb, and if it is, you shall find out about it in good time.* So she made herself go on with her chores, carefully wiping and drying each plate, dish and utensil and putting them back in their places on the kitchen shelves. *A place for everything, and everything in that place,* was one of the rules which Dr Crumb had taught her when she was very little.

She was just emptying the dirty water out of the kitchen window when Dr Crumb called to her. "Fever. Dr Stayling would like to speak with you."

So it did have something to do with her! She put the bowl upside-down on the sill to drain, then shut the window. She ran a hand over her head, glad that she had shaved that morning. Then she went through into the workroom.

Dr Stayling was a tall, broad-shouldered old man. He shaved his head, like all the Order, but he didn't bother to clip the hairs in his nostrils, which were long and steely grey and quivered when he breathed. Fever, facing him, reminded herself that it would be childish to find that distracting.

"Fever," said Dr Crumb, looking worried, "Dr Stayling has a proposal for you."

"It is not my proposal, you understand," said Dr Stayling, with that North Country accent of his which grew stronger when he was excited. "Kit Solent, a minor archaeologist, has asked me to supply an Engineer to live at his house on Ludgate Hill and help him to study artefacts from a new site he has discovered. He has requested you, Fever."

Fever, like a good Engineer, showed no emotion, but beneath her white coat her heart began to beat very quickly.

"Fever is very young, to be sent out on such a placement," said Dr Crumb.

"Nevertheless, Crumb, you're always telling us how rational and capable she is. And it is perfectly usual for young Engineers to be sent out into the world. Only then do we find out if they are truly men of reason, or if they will fall prey to the world's temptations. You did it yourself, Crumb."

"Yes," said Dr Crumb, looking suddenly flustered. "Yes, I did, and it was a . . . a troubling period. Difficult. . ."

Dr Stayling went and stood at the window, gazing out across the great, smoky, unreasonable city. He said, "I always had high hopes for young Solent. As a young man he struck me as having a very rational mind. Made some interesting discoveries. Remember that old underground railway station down by the Marsh Gate? That was one of his finds. Remarkable state of preservation. Then he went and married some digger's daughter, and that was the end of his usefulness. They busied themselves mooning about and having babies for a few years, and then the girl died, and ever since he's just looked after the children while living off his savings, which I should imagine are getting pretty low by now. I'm pleased to hear that he's digging again. It is rational for the Order to encourage him in any way we can."

Fever thought that she liked the sound of Master Solent, although she knew it was irrational to form an opinion based on such little knowledge of him. Still, she looked hopefully at Dr Crumb, wondering if he would let her go.

Dr Crumb still looked troubled. He said, "Fever

is a great help to me here, Dr Stayling. What shall I do without her?"

"Oh, I'll ask young Quilman to come up and assist you, Crumb. He's highly rational. And it is only for a short time; three weeks or a month. So pack your bag, Fever Crumb. You will be leaving for Ludgate Hill tomorrow."

3

The Wind Tram

The main entrance to Godshawk's Head was not through its mouth, as you might expect, for annoyingly Godshawk's sculptor had chosen to represent him with his lips firmly closed. Instead, the Order and their visitors came and went through a door at the top of a flight of steps which led up the Head's left nostril.

Out of that door and down those steps next morning came Fever Crumb, in the pearl-grey London daylight, pushing open the gate in the high fence which ran all round the Head and walking out on to the tram stop, which was a timber platform built on piles against Godshawk's upper lip.

Dr Crumb came with her. He had carried her cardboard suitcase from their quarters, and he would have liked to carry it further. He would have liked to go with her all the way to Solent's house and see what sort of place she was to live in and among what kinds of people. Fever would have liked that, too. But neither of them dared suggest it, for fear the other would think them irrational.

So they stood on the Head's wooden moustache in the gusty, biting wind and wondered what to say. The tram was due, but as yet there was no sign of it. The wire-link fence sang thinly in the breeze.

"The wind is still from the west," observed Dr Crumb at last. "You will have a good, brisk run to the Terminus, and from there I believe it is but a short walk to Solent's place."

Fever agreed. They stood facing each other, the collars of their white coats turned up against the wind. On Fever's head was a wide-brimmed straw hat which Dr Crumb had unearthed from somewhere, saying she would need it to protect her scalp from the sun. She held it on tightly and watched the thick, gunmetal clouds sweep above the city and thought about sums, angles, anything that would take her mind off what she was feeling.

She didn't want to go. She wanted to stay in the

Head forever. She wanted Dr Crumb to hold her hand and lead her back inside. She felt afraid of living without him, and angry at him for not standing up to Dr Stayling and insisting that she stay. But she knew, too, that those feelings, like all feelings, were irrational. They were the frightened instincts of a small animal leaving the nest for the first time. Everyone had instincts, just as everyone had hair; they were another vestige of humanity's primitive past. A good Engineer learned to suppress them.

The tram-lines began to chirrup, and then to hum. She glanced to windward, and there was the tram coming down the long sweep of the viaduct which carried it above the roofs of Wary Edge. In another half minute it would be at Godshawk's Head. She turned back to Dr Crumb, and almost lost control and hugged him, but by then a whole crowd of Engineers were coming out of Godshawk's nostril like a highly educated sneeze, and what would they think of her if they saw her acting on her feelings? They would think that they had been right all those years ago, and that girls were not suited to the ways of Reason. So she held tight to the handle of her suitcase with one hand, and kept that farm-girl hat in place with the other,

and just nodded to Dr Crumb, and Dr Crumb nodded back, and wiped his eyes with his coat cuff and said, "Bother this wind. . ."

"Farewell, Fever Crumb!" called the other Engineers. "Good luck! Be reasonable!" And she bowed to them too, and then the tram was almost alongside the platform and there was nothing to do but turn and run for it while Dr Crumb in a voice too small for her or anyone else to hear, said, "Take care, little Fever! Take care. . ."

Fever had often watched wind trams pass the Head, but she had never boarded one before. There was a worrying gap between the platform's edge and the tram's deck, but her legs were long and strong and she leaped it easily and dumped herself on one of the slatted wooden seats behind the main mast. The tram did not slow, but kept trundling past the tram stop at a steady twelve miles per hour so that the Head fell quickly astern, and was soon hidden behind a terrace of thirtieth-century villas.

Fever set her suitcase down on the deck between her feet and groped in her pocket for the coins which Dr Crumb had given her. The tram conductor, a squat man with a wooden leg, came stumping aft, and she said, "The Central Terminus," and put the

coins in his hand. In return he gave her an oyster shell and an expectant stare, as if he was waiting for a thank you, but Fever did not see any reason to say "thank you" – he had not done her a favour, merely his job. After a moment he stopped waiting and went on his way, muttering something to another of the tram crew, who laughed nastily.

The oyster shell hung on a cord threaded through a hole bored in its edge. Everyone who travelled by London Transport wore one. Fever took off her hat and looped the cord over her head and put her hat back on and sat on her uncomfortable seat and watched the city slide by. The cloud cover was breaking and a stook of sunbeams stood on Ludgate Hill, gilding the wet roofs of the Barbican and the copper-topped towers of the Astrologers' Guild.

For the first time the bad, breathless feeling which had seized her when she was saying goodbye to Dr Crumb began to fade, and in its place came something which she thought of as *Positive Anticipation*, but which someone who had not been brought up by Engineers would have called *excitement*.

More houses went by, their top floor windows level with the tram line. Then the weed-grown

summit of a digger's spoil heap, with goats grazing among the buddleia. They passed other stations where people jumped nimbly aboard carrying children and shopping and cumbersome packages, squeezing into the seats on either side of Fever's. The wind died a little as the tram nosed its way deeper into the built-up heart of the city, passing into the lee of tall buildings. Ahead, flocks of dust-grey pigeons wheeled around the thatched roofs of the Central Terminus, in the shadow of Ludgate Hill. The tram crew furled their flapping sails, took up long poles and quanted the rest of the way, only stopping when they reached the incline outside the terminus, down which the tram coasted until it fetched up with a jarring thump against the straw buffers.

"*Central Terminus! Alight 'ere fer Ludgate Hill, Liver Pill Street an' the Stragglemarket! Change 'ere for stops to 'Bankmentside, St Kylie, 'Ampster's 'Eath, and Effing Forest!*"

And oh, the noise of it! Fever was pummelled by the din and stink and bustle that greeted her as she climbed down from the tram and made her way along the platform, which was spattered with pigeon droppings and clumps of filthy straw fallen from the high, thatched canopy overhead.