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Opening extract from

Six Days

Written by

Philip Webb

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From The Chicken House

This is blistering science fiction at its very best. It's packed full of amazing ideas, brilliant characters and a plot you'll need to work out with your mind's eye. Come on, jump in! We're on a deadline to save the world!

Barry Cunningham
Publisher



SIX DAYS

PHILIP WEBB

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For Mum



DEFINITELY NOT SCAV MATERIAL

SO I FIGURE IT'S JUST ANOTHER DAY RIPPING DOWN LONDON FOR US SCAVS, BUT I'M DEAD WRONG COS THIS IS THE SHIFT EVERYTHING GOES BALLISTIC.

First up, our crusher goes kaput, and that's a proper hassle cos we've got to de-clog the filters, which is *the* worst job, and we don't get a bean for it cos we ain't doing real scavving. And guess who's buried in the intakes up to their elbows in concrete powder with a glorified bog brush? Yep, when you're fifteen and a girl, you get all the plum jobs like that cos there ain't no one else on the team can fit in the damn intakes. Well, there's Wilbur, my kid brother, but he ain't in the frame. He'd probably just crawl up here and go to sleep. Bright as a pin, but anything scav-related goes right over his bonce. Anyhow, I'm trying not to think what

would happen if the crusher was to crank up again right now, when the old man pipes up from outside.

'Where's Wilbur?'

And you know what? That don't even deserve an answer cos how the hell am I supposed to know?

But then he crams his head into the intakes and even through all the gunk on my goggles I can see he's looking jittery.

'There's been no sign of him since the crusher went down,' he hisses. 'Did you see him?'

I make a show of scanning the tiny space round my head. 'Dad, I ain't seen nothing but the end of my nose for the last hour. He's probably parked on his chuffer somewhere reading a comic.'

'I checked on all the floors. He's not there.'

I don't say nothing then, cos Wilbur's got previous on this. First chink of downtime and he's off nosing about on his tod instead of staying put like he's been told a million times before. And that's bad news on this side of the river.

Outside I can hear the gangmaster barking at everyone to get a lick on, even though there ain't nothing to do till I get these filters clear. He's narked cos every minute the crusher's out of action, he's losing, too. It means we'll be working double speed to play catch-up. And if we're shorthanded there'll be hell to pay.

Dad drags me out by the ankles just as the gangmaster disappears behind the crusher's tracks. 'I'll finish up here. You go and rustle him up. I can make out like you're still inside. And, Cass, don't hang around. I can't stall them for ever.'

'But—'

'Don't argue with me, Cass. Just do it.'

I suppose it makes sense but I don't like it cos we can't afford for the gangmaster to get wind of this. He's always on the look out for an excuse to ditch us from the crew cos we're slower than the others after Dad bust his leg in an accident and it set bad. So we could really do without my useless brother going missing . . .

I sneak into the gaff we've been scavving since the shift started.

'Wil-bur!' I call out – sing-song with a touch of the evil I'll do to him when I find him. I'm still hoping he's just holed up in a cupboard reading from his extensive collection of cartoon cobblers . . .

But it's kind of creepy quiet, like you know there ain't no one there.

And then it hits me where he's gone.

I grab up my gear – ropes, backpack, helmet – cos I'll stick out like a sore thumb wandering off-site without it.

By now everyone's crowded round the busted crusher – guards, boffins, scavs – so it's easy slipping out the far end of Little Sanctuary back across the wasteland towards the river.

Wilbur, what a right royal pain in the bejesus. He's been on about it for weeks, though I ain't paid it one ounce of attention. Cos it was just him blathering on. But I remember he was gutted when we wasn't detailed to be on the Parliament crews.

Luck loves me in one way cos it's the third morning of smog on the trot, a real snot-gobbler as they say, green and sopping from the dust and the fumes. Which means full mask and goggles is the order of the day, so no one clocks that I ain't meant to be there. 'Specially as demolition's at full pelt. This is the face of the scav-zone north of the river and there's got to be a thousand crews working the streets from Millbank to Embankment. But if you ask Wilbur (and I ain't asking), they're all wasting their time.

I hurry down Bridge Street, ducking between the pillars of the old shop fronts, blending in with other crews as they queue up to offload into the crusher chutes. If a gangmaster spots me I'll be in it up to my neck, but everyone's so pooped and bent double with their bins I don't get a second glance.

Man, Wilbur's got some explaining to do. Right after

I spiflicate him. See, he's got some notion he knows where the artefact really is.

Which is nuts.

Cos ever since the end of the Quark Wars, our lords and masters, the Vlads, been forcing scavs to tear down London to find it. A hundred years we been on the case! The Empire of New Russia, the conquerors of the world, with all their fancy machines, can't figure out where it is. But Wilbur thinks he's gone and figured it out just by reading some comics!

Course, the destination keeps shifting. A few months back it was in Churchill's bunker, down on King Charles Street. He was ready to bet his life on it. Till we heard that got picked clean without so much as a murmur.

Now he thinks it's in Big Ben.

It's quiet when I get there, what with the crushers out of earshot. I'm all knackered from the running so I spend a minute getting my breath back, just staring up at the lone tower. And I get a funny feeling about the place, the way it looms above me in the lime smog, caught in the river searchlights, looking spooky and proper lovely. Shame it's gonna be brick-dust inside a couple of months. I rip off my mask and goggles cos they're steaming up big-time. The rest of the Houses of

Parliament is just a honeycomb – scavved out to the bare bones and surrounded by mud canyons and mounds of slag. There's just a couple of teams at the far end ripping down the masonry. In a few days, they'll be ready to prep the tower. That's how it goes. Like starving ants we swarm into every nook of every building, one by one, from your garage to your palace.

Big Ben is gonna have its day.

But not today.

There's some old Portakabins and scaffolding round the base of the tower, and one of the first-floor windows has been busted in, which is probably Wilbur, so I climb up the scaffold and go in the same way past bits of glass. It's dark inside cos all the windows are coated with smog dust.

'Wilbur, you berk!' I yell.

Nothing.

'Wilbur, stop messing about!'

Silence. Just my boots scuffing around in the grit.

'The old man's gonna go mental if he finds out, so you better get down here pronto.'

My voice goes echoing up into the tower. I pull the torch out my pack and switch it on. There's a gloomy hall up ahead, pretty much empty apart from a few benches, and the start of a spiral stairway. Great.

Doesn't take much to figure out he's gone to the top, to the clock. Probably a hundred metres, and then some.

I tighten the straps on my pack and start up the stairway. For the first couple of floors there's landings with mouldy carpet going into the wreckage of the Houses of Parliament.

'Wilbur, you waste of space, I'm gonna burn every one of them damn comics when we get back, swear to God.' But I don't yell this, cos I'm done with yelling. And I don't mean it neither cos Wilbur's head's in the clouds, that's all. He don't mean no harm.

But then my heart just about jumps through my gob.

Someone's standing in the shadows right in front of me.

I stumble back against railings and my pack nearly tips me over the stairwell. I swing up my torch.

It ain't Wilbur staring back at me.

And that freaks me out even more. Cos why would anyone else be here?

It's a boy. Tall and wiry and wild-looking. His eyes blaze at me. And that's weird. He don't squint or shield his face – he just seems to soak up the torchlight. I hold the beam there, like it might hold him at bay. Cos I ain't sure what to make of him. Them eyes – green and clear and unblinking. Like a cat giving you daggers. And he

don't look like any boy I ever seen around London. Definitely not scav material. He's got this crazy hair with clumps chopped out – done in a hurry. By the village idiot. With a blindfold on. And he's so clean you can see the black of his hair and even his eyelashes. I'd have to have a month of baths to look that shiny. His lips are pink and his hands . . . His hands are practically *royal* next to my scabby mitts. You never seen such beautiful hands, like on a statue. Still, the strangest thing is his threads, like military get-up but flimsy, more like a kid's idea of a uniform. About as useful for scavving in as a pair of pyjamas.

'Who the hell are you?' I go.

He don't answer. Maybe he don't speak English. Maybe he's a Vlad or a boffin. Except what's he doing here on his tod, creeping about in the shadows? And suddenly I remember about Wilbur and my hackles go up. Cos scavs have got all kinds of tales about survivor-mutants that creep about in the Underground tunnels, snatching kids and that. Or wanderers from the Northern Wilds. And I always figured them stories was cobblers but look at me now, trying to stop the torch from shaking. Except, the more I look at him, the more I calm down. Cos he's just too flippin' clean to be a baby-eating Feral.

'You seen my brother? Kid, so high, bit gormless.' I stop myself, realising this description is a tad pointless. 'Look, you seen *anyone* around here?'

He steps back, looking like he might make a run for it.

'Hey, slow down. I ain't gonna hurt you. You just scared the crap out of me, OK?'

He keeps his distance and steals a glance over the stairwell. Then he's straight back to me with his wary eyes, shivering a bit now in his bonkers outfit.

'It's just me. There ain't no one else . . . Look, do . . . you . . . speak . . . Ing . . . ger . . . lish?'

'I understand you,' he goes. He's got the queerest accent – *clean* you might say, like he's picked English up from a book. 'There's a boy. I saw him pass. He went higher, up there. I was going to call to him but I didn't want to scare him away . . .'

He trails off, probably cos he's twigged how dodgy that sounds. I'm thinking, *Yeah, but you ∂i∂n't mind∂ giving me the fright of the century, ∂i∂ you?* I turn to go, cos this is about the weirdest conversation I've had in yonks and it ain't helping me track down Wilbur.

'What are you all looking for?' he blurts out. It's like the words don't come natural to him, like he ain't done no speaking for a long time.

'What?'

'All you people. What are you searching for?'

I'm thinking, *Are you kidding? Surely everyone knows about the lost artefact . . .* But I ain't got time to answer him cos from way up above us in the tower comes the smashing of glass and a muffled cry. Wilbur!

I whirl away from the boy and charge up the stairs, three at a time, my pack slamming up and down with each stride. After a few flights I snatch a glance back and I see his shiny face staring up at me, then he starts following.

I bound up till it's two-at-a-time, then one-at-a-time, tripping, scrambling, then practically crawling on all fours. By the time I reach the top my blood's pumping so hard I'm seeing stars.

There's a bell. The biggest bloody bell I've seen ever, green with age, and if it was to sound off now I reckon it'd kill me stone dead.

'Wilbur?' My voice wheezes out like the last gasp of a mouse.

There's this passageway past all the cogs and innards of the clock, and it leads out onto the back of the clock face. And I can see grey daylight through it, the black numerals and the hands, and a hole near the spindle at the centre. But no Wilbur. I throw off my pack.

The boy stumbles into the space behind me, gasping and retching.

'Give me a leg up,' I go.

'What?'

'Jesus, do you speak English or don't you? Give me a bunk up!'

I show him how to link his fingers into a step, and he hoists me up the wall opposite the clock face where these old pipes and light fittings are. Somehow I scramble up the pipes onto the spindle, then inch to the hole in the glass. I see shreds of green smog, glints of the Thames, the last stumps of Westminster Bridge, far below.

My stomach goes to water. Wilbur's gone. Dear God, no. He's at the bottom now, and I've got to go down and find his body, what's left of it. And I've got to tell Dad . . .

And then I hear a whimpering cry. 'Cass?'

I practically slip over the edge with shock. Then, slowly, I lean out as far as I dare.

And right at the end of the minute hand is Wilbur, clinging on with everything he's got.