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Opening extract from

Fearsome Dreamer

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CHAPTER 1
ANGLE TAR

RUE

Surely that was too much blood for anyone to lose.

She never would have thought that people had so much of the stuff inside them. Was it all in the blood, then, and was she seeing this woman's life draining away before her eyes? Would it stay with her for ever, this moment? Would she tell herself to remember it, to see if she could, years upon years later?

Rue clutched her arms together. The woman before her moaned. It sounded like a cat's warning.

'I need you to put your hands here for me, dear,' said a voice. But Rue stood stiff as a fence board, unwilling to accept what the voice was telling her.

'Rue, pay attention,' said the voice. It sounded calm and steady, but Rue thought she could hear a thin, vibrating note of stress and urgency underneath it.

'Hands, if you please. Now.'

Rue blinked, crumpling to her knees and moving forwards. There'd be hell to pay, her body had evidently reasoned without her, if she ignored the note of threat in that last 'Now'. She placed her hands where indicated, but

the rags under her palms were already dripping onto the floor. Rue reached over to a pile beside her and snatched up clean strips of cloth, laying them on top of the soaked mess. In seconds the material bloomed wet flowers of blood. She pushed her hands against them and felt her throat convulse.

'Push hard, dear,' said the voice. 'Don't worry about hurting her.'

The groaning was the worst. It was thin and continuous, and she could feel the vibrations of it through the flesh she pushed against. The owner of the voice was out of sight, far away behind the hills of her knees. Rue was alone down this end. What if too much blood was lost? It would be her fault. How could anyone leave her alone when she didn't know what she was doing? She felt panic flit around the edge of her and tried hard to ignore it.

It seemed to go on for hours, but there was no asking if she could stop or have a rest. Her arms shook occasionally with the effort. The woman's blood had soaked into the cracks in the palms of her hands. She could hear the soothing up and down cadence of her mistress's voice at the head of the bed.

'Fernie?' she called.

The soothing voice stopped. Fernie's head appeared over the hillock of rumpled blankets and sweating flesh that made up Rue's current view.

'What is it, dear?'

'Um. My arms are tired.'

'Not for much longer. Dam Woolmaker's doing just fine.'

'When's the baby coming?'

'Not too long, Rue. Think you can keep your end up?'

Rue swallowed. 'Course.'

It was probably a lie, she thought fitfully as Fernie's head disappeared. Fern was an honest soul – she had once said to Rue that being honest made life a lot more interesting than lying – but when she was trying to calm a woman in labour bleeding out she'd be sneakier than a snake. The widow Woolmaker could die. Would die, maybe, and her baby with her. And maybe it would even take a few more hours. Rue didn't want to think about that, but thinking was about all she could do right now.

She'd never seen anyone die before.

She thought about praying to Tro to keep the woman alive. Then she thought about praying to Buc to keep him from taking her. In either case it probably wouldn't do much good, and if Fernie heard her she'd laugh in her face for believing that gods were worth anything more than a good story.

Odd what came into your head at a time like this. Here a woman lay dying, as Rue would eventually do herself. Was it better to be practical about it, as Fernie was, or did it help to believe there were powerful beings who could intervene and extend or take away life? Did that make everything easier?

'Let's wrap her up properly, then.'

Rue looked up. Fernie's hands were on her own, lifting them gently away.

'Move out of it so's I can get to her. But mind you keep a watch, for I've not taught you this yet.'

'She's . . .?'

'Sleeping, dear. I gave her something to sleep her for the time being.'

'What about the baby?'

'We'll see. Stubborn little thing, causing such trouble for his mam.'

Rue watched her work, watched her hands flit quickly back and forth the way they did when she was cooking or making up tonics. She was envious of the hands and the skill, but not of the woman. Fernie was gnarled and fat.

'Is she all right?' she asked.

'Bless you, yes. You thought she was going to die?'

'There was so much blood.'

'And she'll need to be making more soon enough, else she'll be in a bit of trouble. I'll admit it was touch and go there for a while, and there'll be more of that before the end. But she's strong, she'll pull through.'

'Fern.'

'Yes, dear.'

'You did something.'

'Whatever do you mean?'

Rue caught it in Fernie's voice. Faint, but there.

'She should be dead,' said Rue. 'She should, or her kit. You did something. You should tell me. I'm your prentice. I've to learn, haven't I?'

'Rue,' said Fernie, pulling the bandage tight and knotting it off. 'You've filled your head with too much fluff, so you have. There's no magic in what we do. Just hard work. You'd best to go on home to bed. We'll be needing you later again.'

'But what are you going to do?'

Fern sat back on her haunches, her work complete. 'Stay,

course. I'll keep watch on her, don't you worry. If I need you I'll send for you.'

'But –'

'Go on now. Off home.'

Rue thought about refusing. She would have with anyone else. Fernie was hard to test, though; somewhere under all that kindness and fat was a will of iron. So she bit her tongue and scrambled up from the floor. A wave of dizziness swamped her and she thought NO furiously, as if her will alone could keep her upright. Miraculously, it seemed to work.

'Your pardon,' she managed.

Fernie was looking at her speculatively. 'No matter. It's the smell of the blood, I expect. You did fine. You need some fresh air, is all. The walk home'll set you right.'

Rue took a last lingering look at the woman crouched on the floor, her face creased with exhaustion, and left.

Two miles to home, she thought, as she got outside and sucked in the night breeze. At least it's warm.

She woke in her room. She had fistfuls of bed sheet gripped in her hands, and her fingers ached from being clenched so tightly.

That one had been fairly bad.

She had dreamed of people. So many people it hurt to try and count them all. They were in a grey, listless kind of open space, with nothing much to see. At first she had thought them an everyday crowd; though bizarrely dressed. But they didn't move like normal people, instead following irregular, senseless paths.

The more she watched them, the more she realised that they were wandering; that was it. Wandering around in slow, looping circles, directionless. When she looked into their faces she saw nothing there. Their eyes were misty, filmed over.

She didn't like them. They seemed hollow.

Something was going on over her shoulder. She could feel a tingling as the skin on her back crawled in warning. She turned.

It took a moment to work out what was happening, but then someone near her dropped to the ground, as if their legs had been cut. She stared at the crumpled body. Then someone else fell, and lay without moving. She heard a series of thumps. Several more people fell.

Bodies flumped downwards. Their eyes were still open as they lay, curled awkwardly, their arms and legs at angles. The noise become louder and louder as more people crashed to the ground.

Rue stood rooted as the crowd fell, their limbs scattering the floor. Why wasn't this awful thing happening to her? What was saving her? What was different?

She recoiled at the cloying memory of it. Feeling clammy, she levered herself up from the bed and pulled strings of hair from her eyes. She had sweated the bedclothes through again.

Fernie would scold her. Fernie couldn't understand Rue's nightmares. She believed in the practical everyday of life. Dreams were for the academics and city folk, the studiers of mind, and had no place in a hedgewitch's repertoire. No one cared about dreams out here.

Rue peeled the blanket and damp sheet back, noticing with disgust how her nightdress clung to her in moist folds. She wondered if she had time for a quick bathe in the river before Fernie got back. Doubtless the witch would have spent the night with the mother-to-be, making sure she made it through the long hours in one piece. She hadn't been called, so Dam Woolmaker couldn't have given birth yet. Fern would expect the place to be clean though, and some tea ready.

Well. She couldn't work sweat-soaked. Fernie would smell her and know. Rue dragged the blanket from the bed, dropping it carelessly on the flagstone floor, and stripped off the sheet. She pushed her feet into raggy slippers and took her bathing cloth from behind the door. When she opened the shutters she saw that the sun was up, though it hadn't been awake for long. She took the dry slither of honey and lemon-rind soap Fernie had made her from the windowsill and pushed open the back door, shivering pleasantly as the cool air wound around her legs. As she walked, she worked at the nightdress with one hand, peeling it from her, and continued to the river naked. She would wash the thing at the same time as herself.

She looked about as she made her way, wondering if she'd see any sign of life. A shivery rustle in the heather patch to her right sounded like a rabbit. She loved rabbits, but Fernie wouldn't let her keep one, saying they weren't practical because they didn't provide anything of use. Fernie had bees, for honey and wax, and chickens for eggs, and a goat for milk, and the biggest herb garden in the area. Not that she needed them. Her profession never wanted for anything in the country.

Occasionally people offered to pay her, but as she always said, what use was money out here? Most of her payment was in food, clothes and services. Fernie never had to pay for anything at the farms or the village shops – even if the shopkeeper she visited that day had never been treated by her, he knew someday he would be, or a member of his family. So Fernie had what she wanted, and people did things for her as and when. A bit of gardening, or fixing her roof, or giving her a nice plump hen, or cheese and butter freshly churned, or cakes, mead and pickles.

As Fernie's apprentice Rue enjoyed most of the same deal, though some thought they could get away with charging her since she was still learning. Fernie set them to rights if Rue told her about it. After all, one day their children would be in Rue's care, and if they'd slighted her she'd remember, and perhaps those children wouldn't be as looked after as others.

Well.

It was politeness, anyway, at the end of the day. A hedge-witch would never refuse to treat children, no matter what their parents had done.

Rue reached the river, picking her way down the bank. Her bathing cloth deposited on a rock, she moved to the water's edge, clutching her nightdress and soap. The icy water tickled at her toes, catching her breath. She knew of old that it wouldn't do to wait as courage would fail, so she forced herself forwards, pebbles sliding under her feet. Launching herself in, she let out a mangled squeal as her body was enclosed in a freezing liquid case, and trod water furiously. Her skin protested in a bout of vicious tingling,

but soon grew numb. She started to relax, ducking her nightdress under the surface with bloodless hands. She let it float before her, one hand thrust through an armhole to stop it rushing away, and scrubbed at herself with the soap.

She liked being here. Here she could pretend she was a river nymph, perhaps, or a goddess of the wild, surveying her kingdom. Out of the river and she was just apprentice witch Vela Rue, not worthy of her third adult name until she'd mastered a craft. She was a fairly good student, she supposed. Fernie would never have taken her on if she wasn't capable. Rue didn't want to be fairly good, though. If she wasn't going to be extraordinary, then what was the point of it? She could not wait her life out here, none but the villagers knowing the importance of her. She knew, *knew* in the very depths of her that she was destined for something more. Something she could do better than anyone else. Something that would make her shine and people flock to her.

She rinsed her arms, feeling a sudden hunger gripe. She should get back before Fernie did. Turning to wade out of the river, she spied something darting behind a tree and froze.

It was a person, that much she was sure of. Her mind worked. Who would hide? It had to be a boy.

'Come out,' she called. 'I can see you, silly!'

She was aware of her nakedness of a sudden. The water came up to her waist, but she was bare from then on up. Her skin was pimpled and white. She waded out hurriedly, one eye on the tree. Grabbing with one hand, she unravelled her bathing cloth and wrapped herself into its thick depths.

The morning air was mild, as it was midsummer, but she'd have to start moving if she wanted to get warmed up. The sodden nightdress in one hand left a spattered trail of water on the stones beside her. As she approached the tree, she realised she could see no shape behind it.

'Where've you gone?' she muttered, peering around the trunk. Nothing there. Maybe she imagined it. Maybe it had just been an animal.

Or maybe it had been a man, secretly watching her, some sprite man who had the trick of disappearing like that. Maybe he came to visit her at night, watching her while she slept, too. Perhaps she would think about that more later, alone in bed. She started to make her way back to the cottage.

Rue had a vague idea she was regarded as silly and dreamful by some, but she didn't care. She thought wishing for more a special quality, a quality always possessed by those who made something extraordinary of their lives. No one in the village seemed to think and yearn the way she did. No one seemed to want more than what they got. Stories of gods and fairies fascinated her, creatures of power that were not sway to mortal rules, not bound by normality. Fernie tutted when she brought them up, but if pressed with a glass of mead in the evenings, would tell Rue the stories she had heard in her own youth.

Rue reached the back door to the cottage and opened it, now glad of the chance to put on some clothes, at least for an hour or two. Come lunch it'd be too hot for much except a summer skirt and muslin shirt.

'That you, Rue?' called a voice. Rue sighed. Trust Fernie to get back before she did.

'Yes,' she responded, stopping to squeeze out her night-dress and hang it outside on the line to dry. She dressed in her room and skittered meekly into the kitchen, noting that Fernie had already made tea.

'I shall do some food,' Rue said, trying her best.

'No need,' said Fernie. 'We're for herbing now, then it's back to Woolmaker I go.'

'But . . . but Fern, you've not rested all night, I'll warrant,' said Rue. 'You need to lie down and catch some sleep!'

'She needs my help, dear, and herbs I've run out of. So to the woods we go to gather more, and then it's brew making, and I've to get back to her as soon as possible. She'll fade fast if not.'

Rue shuffled. 'That's silly,' she said at last. 'You can't treat someone when you're exhausted.'

'This is the craft, Rue,' said Fernie, massaging her craggy cheeks. 'It gets real hard sometimes and you just need to get through it. Who else'll do it? Who else can? You must learn this as soon as you're able.'

Rue poured herself a tea silently. She was hungry and herbing was dull. She sighed.

'We'll take some bread with us, to chew on while we go,' said Fernie kindly. 'And if you come across any berries, they're yours. Pick some to keep if you want, and we'll make some jam.'

Rue felt a familiar guilt stealing over her. Fernie could be very generous and fair when she had no call to be. It was annoying.

* * *

Rue ran her hands through the trailing leaves of a plant, peering at the dusty soil underneath to see if any blood herbs were hiding there. Fernie had said that particular family of herbs usually enjoyed keeping close to aurers, so it was best to scan across the wood floor for the telltale glimmer of golden petals and then have a look at the ground nearby.

Something flashed out of the corner of her gaze. She turned her head to see a squirrel clinging to a tree trunk near where she squatted. Its tiny claws dug into the bark, black eyes gazing at her. Then it was gone, the plump body disappearing upwards into the foliage.

'If only Tro would turn me into a squirrel,' Rue murmured as Fernie approached, her feet crackling over dry twigs and leaves.

'Tro knows you wouldn't last a day. You're far too silly a creature,' said Fernie, basket stuffed with plant matter.

'Squirrels ain't exactly the most sensible either,' protested Rue, as they made their way along the path. 'They're all nervy.'

'So you'd be if you were a squirrel.'

They tramped in silence for a moment. Bird calls pinwheeled across the dense canopy.

'Fern.'

'Yes, dear.'

'Have you ever lived outside this village? I mean, gone to other places in Angle Tar, like one of the cities?'

'Cities are full of idiots with big ideas. Big ideas get you little in return.'

'They learn things, though. They do them mind studies. It sounds interesting.'

'Rue, my chicklet. You have to have money to do such idle stuff. Only rich people live in cities and learn. Us folk mind our own business out here, and they mind theirs in the cities, and everyone gets along fine. No good stirring things up, it always leads to trouble. Why you asking me such? Don't want to be a hedgewitch any more, is it?'

'No,' said Rue. 'I love hedgewitching, you know it. I just wonder about other places sometimes, is all. You know them dreams I get. I just wonder what they're about. Are there other countries out in the world with weird people and everything's different?'

'You've no call to be thinking about that,' said Fernie briskly. 'Angle Tar's the only place with a civilised bone in its body. The world out there is nothing more than a load of places with people in 'em. And the people out there are neither more interesting, nor better, nor lower, than us here in Angle Tar. It's humans, Rue. We're the same wherever you go, no matter what we surround ourselves with.'

Rue sighed. They always went the same way, these conversations. But she couldn't quite believe the cynical version of the world that Fernie gave her. Not after the things she'd dreamed of. One day, she had long ago promised herself, she'd see the world with her own eyes.

She would have the truth of it.

CHAPTER 2
WORLD

WHITE

He woke to freezing, draining cold.

Out of everything that had been done to him so far, it was the cold that was the hardest to bear. Hunger was a creature whose ways he understood. His childhood had not been a rich one; hunger he had learned to deal with. A food unit might be free; credits to buy food from it were not. And life had been made harder than necessary for people like him.

Even as a child, White had been aware that there was something about him that didn't fit. The other children he knew were so unlike him that he found them incomprehensible and alien. They cared about pointless things like games he had never heard of, famous people he had heard of but couldn't muster up any interest in, and the latest holographic shoes that his family would never be able to afford.

Each time his father had suggested that White should try to get to know the other children at school, he had found the idea so absurd he would choke on it and be unable to speak. He felt bad, sometimes, because all his

father needed was for him to agree, or comfort him with trying, and he would be happier. But instead, when he sat White down and told him that those children were not so different from him, that he should ask them who their favourite GameStars player was or which Life worlds they liked the best, he just looked back at his father, choking silently.

The truth was he had really grown to hate other children, and the truth was that at first they made fun of him and then ignored him totally as if he wasn't even worth their spite, and the truth was that even if any of them did like the same snack that he did, that would only make him hate them more. He didn't want to be anything like them. The idea had made him feel ill.

It was so cold, here.

Endless cold was insidious. You only got used to it for periods at a time, and to cope you carved your existence into blocks. Over this block and fine for a while. Barely even noticing it. Then it would stroke you gently over the arms and set you shivering with misery. You endured by begging each second to be the last, and when it was, you basked in the numbness, begging desperately for each extra minute, just another, and just one more, until the shivering began again.

So were his moments spent.

Back in the time pre-prison (as he liked to think of it, his entire life now firmly divided up into BEFORE and NOW), he had often thought about how he might cope if he were ever really and truly imprisoned. It was quite hard to imprison someone with his talent for escape. He had

decided that the best way to cope would be to separate his mind from his body, and spend his time creating another life inside his head.

He would dream.

He was very good at that. It was part of the reason he was here in the first place.

But here and now, and just when he needed it most, his talent for dreaming had utterly deserted him. His thoughts were broken and confused, consisting mainly of thinking about how hungry and cold he was, and trying not to think about how hungry and cold he was. There was no energy left for anything else after that.

It would be easy to blame his mother for this. She was the one who had passed on the freakish abilities that had landed him in here. She was the one who had taught him about his gifts, and urged him incessantly on.

But there was no one to blame, not really, no one except himself, and the defect he had been born with that meant he could do things that others could not.

His mother had told him that there were others like them, but he hadn't yet met a single one. He had been the only one in his school, the only one in his district. As far as he knew, anyway. If there were others, they hid it better than he did.

He didn't want to hide it. Hiding meant shame. He would not be shamed.

When he was younger, there had been a popular slang thing going around; a little rebellious thing kids did as a nose-up to adults, because everyone knew that World's past had been a stupid, dangerous place, weren't they told so

in school? So the other children's favourite nickname for him was 'jesus freak'. He didn't even know what a jesus was – he'd had to look the term up in Life's historical files. It had made him angry when he understood what it meant. He and his mother were *not* religious. Religion was for crazy people; everyone knew that.

He'd tried explaining this to his stupid, pathetic peers, but somehow he could never find the right way to say it, and they just laughed at him and screamed 'look at the jesus freak speak!' in the rhyming way some of the older ones liked to do.

Sometimes he had caught the looks on teachers' faces as they watched him, before they managed to lower their gaze hurriedly. If adults could react in such a way to what he was, then that meant that they felt there was also something wrong with his mother. And that meant that his mother could be wrong. And that led to thoughts he didn't want to have.

The door clicked.

He twitched, a tic he had developed in unconscious reply to the very particular sound of that door click.

He would be strong, this time. There was always another time, another chance to redeem himself. It wouldn't be like the last time, nor the time before that. But his body had chosen to deal with these visits without his input, and before he could stop it, his voice broke into its regular litany.

'Please please please,' he said in a babbling rush. Then, 'I don't know. I'm sorry. I don't know what you want.'

Good Man crouched next to him in his customary

position. His hands were locked loosely between his legs, his eyes kind.

'I'm trying to help you,' said Good Man earnestly. 'I'm the only one that can. You know this. I hate watching you suffer.'

He believed Good Man. He'd even seen tears running down Good Man's cheeks before.

'Please,' said Good Man. 'I'm begging you.'

No, no. I'm begging *you*, he wanted to say. You've got this the wrong way round. What kind of torturer are you?

'Only dogs beg,' said the other, Bad Man. He was in a corner, in his customary shadowed position. Good Man's face was earnest and sweat-streaked. Bad Man could have had the face of an elephant for all he knew – he'd never seen it. Bad Man never came close.

He hated Good Man, quite a lot more than Bad. In the earlier, more lucid days, he had wondered if it was because Good Man was real and close to him, and so gave him something to focus his hate on; or whether it was because Good Man seemed human and kind, in spite of what he was doing.

'What I want to know is,' said Bad Man from his corner, 'why don't you just leave? Why can't you just disappear, like you've done before? They tell me it's the drugs they give you, and the cold and the hunger. But I don't believe it. I believe it's instinctual, like a dog when it needs to hump something. It'll come out, and there will be nothing you can do to prevent it.'

Later, in his mind, they would pay. Later, he would run fragments of the conversation through his head and reply in the way he should have, with a cool, collected *screw you*. In his perfect version of events, there would be violence, and he would be powerful.

But here and now and out loud, he was a child again, frightened and begging.

'I can't do that!' he said, hating the plaintive whine in his own voice.

Good Man grabbed his arm, gripping it at the shoulder joint. 'Your hand is fading.'

White looked down. His wrist was very dirty, he realised. When was the last time they had washed him? Washing in this place consisted of shoving him, naked and grime-streaked, into a Hot 'n' Dry, a hideously ancient contraption that blasted dirt from you with chemically treated, moisture-heavy air. He hadn't felt the soothing, cleansing touch of liquid on his skin for weeks. It was amazing how much you could miss it.

'Your hand is fading, and you don't even realise it,' repeated Good Man, a little sadness creeping into his voice.

'I wasn't,' White managed. 'I wasn't doing it.'

'I told you,' said Bad Man triumphantly to Good Man. 'It's automatic, they can't help it. It'll be soon, you'll see.' He turned to White. 'And when you Jump, we'll track you. You remember the shiny new implant we gave you, don't you? It will track you within seconds to wherever you go. And if you Jump out of World again, we'll know.'

'I don't DO THAT.'

Good Man let go of White's wrist and hung his head. 'I can't help you if you don't want to help yourself.'

'No,' said White, knowing he was begging again. Hating himself for it.

'Listen to me. People like you need help. Why do you want to move around all over the place? It's unnatural. You have everything you need right here.'

'It's not my fault!'

Bad Man's voice drifted out from his corner.

'We know you help the Technophobes,' he said. 'We have evidence of them actively trying to recruit people like you. Just give us names. That's all we want. Names.'

'I don't know any Technophobes! I don't know anyone!'

Good Man sighed, pained. 'Why do you want to hurt people? Why do you hate us?'

'We don't hurt anyone. We don't hurt anyone. We don't do anything!' White screamed, his voice splitting. The worst thing about it was trying to make them *see*. They just wouldn't *see*. It was the despair over this, over knowing he was trapped by people who would never change their minds about him, who would always see him as a dangerous little mutant, that scarred him the most.

Good Man stood up.

'Goodbye,' he said, his voice resigned.

White woke.

He had managed to sleep for a while, after they had gone. But every time he woke, it took a moment for him to remember where he was, and what was happening. He

floated in nothingness, and a voice told him to enjoy it as much as he could, to soak up the blank comfort.

Then he remembered, and wished he'd listened to the voice.

Every wake day began the same. They were wake days now because he could only count his life between being awake and being asleep. There was no concept of time in this tiny, dank place. There were no windows to let in the light, and the strip lights overhead were never turned off. They glowed a pale, heartless sort of blue. The exact shade of blue, he thought, designed to drive you mad. His captors must have done studies on it. They must have tested each imperceptible shade on prisoners until they found the one that broke people the fastest.

The new implant really hurt. Of all the physical things that had been done to him, that galled the most. That they would use something as normal, as natural as the implant against him. Make him hate them more. Surely that was not what they wanted? Surely they wanted him to love them? He had already told them so. Told them he loved World. He *loved* it. That he would never leave. Could they somehow detect the lie in his voice, even when he screamed it with everything he had? Even when he actually believed himself in that moment that he said it out loud, because what was more convincing than desperation for this all to end?

The door clicked, and he twitched, and half of him was relieved that at least there would be someone in the room with him, someone he could talk to. The other half was revolted at himself, that a person could sink so low as to

be grateful for the company of people whose job it was to hurt him as much as they could.

But instead of Good Man and Bad Man, there were two guards he had never seen before. They dragged him upwards and out of his room and down the corridor, presumably to the wash room and that horrific creaking machine.

It was rare that he got to leave his room, and the first couple of times he had looked forward to it, to the opportunity to look around, try and memorise the layout, in the back of his mind nurturing the hope of a daring plan of escape. But the corridors all looked the same, and nothing gave him a clue about anything, and after a while it was too hard to concentrate on anything much except trying not to fall down between the arms that gripped his. And a while after that, a small seed of fear began to sprout, a fear that told him he didn't want to leave his room any more, that it was easier just to stay in there. Safer.

They didn't go to the wash room this time. They went through a series of doors, doors that weren't even locked, and ended up in a small room, completely bereft of furniture. Four walls, one door, and nothing else.

He was stopped in the middle of the room, and handed a small bundle of clothes and a pair of soft shoes. He stripped off his dirty clothes and stood naked, hastily shaking out the nondescript trousers and tugging them on. It had been a while since he cared about being naked in front of strangers. They never looked at him, in any case, but neither did they turn away; as if he wasn't worth the consideration. The clothes they had given him were scratchy, but clean.

He was led through another door set into the side of

the room. Behind it was a woman in a chair, and a desk in front of her. She smiled at him.

'Hello, Jacob,' she said.

He stared at her dumbly. If this was a new tactic they were trying, he couldn't yet fathom it. Perhaps they thought a sweet motherly type would bring out his inner child. At least they couldn't read his mind yet. It had been gnawing at him ever since they had put the new implant in his head. What if that was what it did, somehow?

But so far, it didn't seem like it. If it had been able to read his mind, he was sure they wouldn't have had to carry on questioning him the way they had, and the operation had been a long time ago. Or perhaps it just seemed a long time ago. He had no way of knowing. He was pierced with a sudden, yearning need to know what date it was, what time precisely. His new implant could have told him, assuming it worked anything like the old one, but he couldn't access it in this place. They had blocked it somehow; or maybe it wasn't even activated yet.

The woman was looking at him with the glazed smile of someone unsure if she should keep waiting for him to say something. She seemed to decide against it, and spoke again.

'I'm afraid we don't have the clothes you came in. Regulations. Silly, really. But I hope those will do. They're not very exciting, I'm afraid.' She gave a fluting laugh.

It took him a moment, and quite a lot of effort, but his reply was worth the energy. 'Why do you think I would give a *fuck* about some clothes?'

He put everything he had into the *fuck*. His voice was

raspy. Another time he might have been pleased about that. He had always wanted an interesting voice.

Her face had dropped, and turned uneasy. She would know what it meant. It was a hot topic on Life news at the moment; the degradation of today's youth by the awful, aggressive language of the past.

He felt first a flash of guilt, then a tidal wave of fury that overrode everything else. So what if she was kind? So what if she went home to her three children at night and read them stories, and tucked them in, and always volunteered for extra civic duty shifts, and was the loveliest woman in her block? She worked here. *Here*. That made her either deeply stupid or plainly evil, neither of which he could forgive. She deserved it, and more. She deserved everything he could throw at her, which was only one hurtful word, after all. He would have done more if he could.

'Well,' she said brightly, as if he hadn't spoken at all. 'Everything is in order. You didn't have much on you when you came in, so nothing to give back. If you'd like to step through that door to your right, Jacob. Thank you so much.'

He considered saying no, and seeing how far that got him, but his legs were trembling, and he felt tired. He hadn't walked around this much in quite a while. He considered telling her that his name, as far as he was concerned, was not Jacob, which was a weak, normal kind of name; but White, a purer simpler name, a name that suited him much better, even if it wasn't the one his parents had given him. But the fight had gone out of him in the face of her bland cheeriness. It was an effective weapon.

So he went to the door and it opened up automatically for him, and beyond it was bright light, painful and fierce.

He stood, tears leaking from his eyes.

'Jacob.'

There was a vague shape beyond, but the light was still too bright.

'Jacob,' the voice said again, with a tremble. 'It's me, Cho. It's your sister. I've come to pick you up. They're letting us take you home.'

He heard the door behind him click shut.