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Opening extract from

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Prologue

Julian tumbles. Slowly, it seems. Twisting down, down through the thin, grey air. Mila clings tightly to the safety wire and watches him get smaller. His body turns lazily, and as it faces upwards she glimpses the pale face, the dark O of his mouth as he screams. Then he turns again, hiding his face from her. He is tiny now, shrinking, shrinking. All she can make out is the dark blue of the Agency uniform she stole for him in Sangatte.

He hits the main span of the bridge and ricochets off, spinning furiously. He must be dead, she thinks. That must have killed him. Please let it have killed him. But it is another few seconds before his body hits the water and she can be sure. He has fallen a quarter of a kilometre into the freezing waters of the English Channel.

At the speed he is travelling, water is like concrete. This she knows. It is one of the many things she has learned in her short life. Her stomach, already cramped with fear, knots and gnarls as she tries to comprehend what has just happened. She has lost him. Simultaneously, another part of her mind, uncomfortably lacking in compassion, is asking a

plaintive question. What now, Mila? What are you going to do now Julian is dead?

How will you survive?

1

A clock ticked slowly, legato seconds checked off one by one.

The woman. Attractive, older, blonde. In her mid thirties, Mila guessed. She'd learned to adjust her estimates in the brief time she'd been on the Isles. Everyone here looked younger than they were. Or maybe everyone back home looked older. The mean had shifted.

The woman sighed. She hadn't given her name. Mila would have remembered, like she remembered everything. She waited for the woman to follow the sigh with a question, but it was the dark-haired man who spoke, wrong-footing her.

'Let's try again,' he said calmly, a fake smile forced into his voice, slightly out of sync with the equally fake smile plastered across his face. It was a good face, Mila thought. Handsome. He was properly young, mid-twenties probably. He was the good cop, which was a role that seemed to suit him. Mila was skilled at reading people, though the occasional misjudgement had taught her not to trust herself entirely.

'What's your name?' The good cop looked at her earnestly, a little sideways grin appearing. *Come on,*

his expression said. *Why fight this?* 'What harm could it do to tell us your name?'

Because giving you my name gives you a measure of power over me, Mila wanted to say. *If I give you what you want, you'll use it against me. Otherwise why would you ask?*

So she said nothing, and kept her head down, staring at a spot at the centre of the plastic table, her chosen focus point. It was the only thing she controlled, that square inch of off-white thermo-plastic; the only thing she owned in the world, and they couldn't take it away from her.

She knew enough about the Agency to know that you couldn't improve your position by co-operating. You couldn't negotiate. If they wanted something from you, they'd let you know about it. Julian had taught her that; it was just one of the million things she'd learned from him. Thinking about him brought pain, and she shut the memory down before it could take hold.

'We're not evil, you know,' Good Cop said. 'You think we are, but we're not. It's common for foreigners to believe the worst about us. We've heard all the stories before.'

Mila had heard the stories too. About the Centres, the Hulks, the rough justice. She was curious to see for herself just what was fact and what hysterical fiction. It couldn't be as bad as what she'd gone through in the U, could it?

‘You have food and clothes, don’t you,’ he asked. ‘And a bed. The Centre is warm and safe, is it not?’

What he said was true. Mila had been held in a dozen camps, or prisons, or ‘Centres’ over the last three years. Some were better than others. Some had nearly killed her. The Centre she was in now was by far the most comfortable. So why was she so full of dread here? she wondered. Was it because Julian was gone? Or was there more to it? There was something about these people that scared her. They were different.

‘We’ve given you books to read,’ he went on. ‘You have a screen to watch the Channels.’

Mila looked back at her spot. She blinked. Sluggish seconds ticked by on the clock.

Then a *crack!* as the woman slammed her palm down on the table, directly over Mila’s focus point, as though Mila’s gaze had burned a spot there, revealing its location. Mila flinched, her heart pounding.

‘What’s your goddamn NAME?’ the woman yelled.

And a sudden torrent of fury loosened Mila’s tongue.

‘What’s YOURS?’ she roared back.

The man and woman sat back as one, smiling. They’d made progress.

‘So at least we know you speak English,’ the man said, pausing for a moment, probably making an internal note on his device. Neither of the Agents

carried anything for the purpose. No one did in this country. They kept it all inside.

'It's important to know names, isn't it?' the good cop said, with another smile from his smile bank. A warm, conciliatory one this time. 'My name's Adam, I . . . ' he stopped, looking alarmed. Mila caught a brief roll of the eyes from the older woman. She guessed that the man hadn't intended to reveal his real name.

Adam went on. 'This is . . . ' He hesitated again.

'Eve?' Mila asked, unable to resist.

The older woman's eyes flicked heavenward in annoyance at her colleague. He was clearly junior, inexperienced. He should have had a false name already prepared for himself and his colleague. Now Mila had been granted a small victory.

'Rebecca,' he said, resignedly, and Mila thought she saw a slight flush of his cheeks. He looked down at the table, perhaps seeking his own spot.

'Where were you born, Mila?' he asked, quietly.

Mila laughed, a sharp bark which said quite clearly that this was a question she would never answer.

He waited a moment, then tried a different tack.

'OK, then tell me this,' he said. 'How did you get onto the Isles?'

Mila stared at her spot and tried to zone out. He spoke like no one else she'd ever met. Perfect English, of course, but more than that. His voice had a confidence, a strength that she'd not come across

before in her travels. He didn't *borrow* language, to use it apologetically. He *owned* it, and handed it over like a gift, wrapped in intent.

'Did you come over the bridge?'

The bridge. The word was enough to send her tumbling back in time to the day she'd lost Julian. A word, a scent. Even a simple gesture. It didn't take much for her to be back on the weathered island of memory.

She stands, half crouching, on the wire-strand cable. It is thick enough to walk on, perhaps a metre in diameter. Nonetheless, she is unable to stand fully, half rigid with fear. The span of the bridge, the section carrying the cars and the trains, is 100 metres below her, and the freezing grey water of the Channel is 150 metres below that.

'Come on,' he says. He is a few steps ahead of her, standing sideways, holding out a hand. His scarred, creased face is smiling encouragement. His curly black hair, shot through with salty white streaks, ruffles in the stiff breeze. They'd waited nine days for a time when the wind wasn't too strong.

He smiles and steps towards her, and then suddenly there is *a wind. A gust. An eddy. And he sways slightly. His left foot lands too far to the side, where the surface begins to slope. Then he is down, quickly. Too quickly. He clutches at a thin electrical wire running along the walkway. This holds him for a moment. But Mila can*

see it is already stretching. It is not designed to hold the weight of a man, even a gaunt, malnourished man. Cleats pop and the cable begins to pull away from the span.

'Get a phone,' Julian says firmly, as though prepared for this moment. 'Once you have a phone, call Beverley Minster. But only if you're in real trouble.'

'Julian, I…' she says, inching towards him. She is too far away.

'There's something in…' he begins, but with a sickening jolt the cable comes fully away and for a tiny instant their eyes meet, his filled with nothing but sorrow, as he disappears over the side, silently.

'It *was* the bridge, wasn't it?' Adam repeated. 'I can see by the way you reacted.'

Mila shook her head. 'No, not the bridge,' she said.

'Then how?'

Mila leaned forward and fixed him with a conspiratorial look. 'OK. I'll tell you,' she said.

Adam leaned forward too, unable to help himself.

'Giant swans,' Mila whispered. 'I was carried by giant purple swans.'

Adam pulled a wry smile from the smile bank. 'That's funny,' he said. 'You have a sense of humour.'

Mila sat back and arranged her features into what she hoped was a look of utter blankness.

‘Adam, let’s step outside for a moment,’ Rebecca said. ‘Please excuse us,’ she said, coldly. ‘My colleague and I would like a private chat.’

‘If you want to chat privately,’ Mila replied quietly, ‘you could just talk to each other using those machines in your heads.’ She looked up at the woman, trying to pierce her with her gaze. ‘You’re just leaving to let me stew for a while. I’m familiar with the process.’

She knew she was talking too much. She’d broken her resolve to say nothing. She was bored, which was part of their tactic. They’d been doing this for hours, days in fact, asking a few questions before leaving the room. Leaving her alone to listen to the incessant ticking of that damn clock, driving little nails of wasted time into her skull.

‘We’ll be back in a few minutes,’ Adam said. ‘Then we’ll have some more questions for you.’

‘Missing you already.’

The heavy door slammed shut, rattling the walls with its solidity, and Mila was left alone with her spot on the table. And the clock, of course.

‘Everything’s recorded,’ Julian tells her, one cold night, as they huddle over a fire in a paint tin in an abandoned farmhouse somewhere in the country that used to be known as Germany. He is eating the leg of a lamb they stole and killed. Messily, cruelly. The

meat is half burnt, half raw and tangy with the taste of the paint chemicals. Nonetheless it is a feast; it's all they've eaten this week apart from a few tins of beans and some tart cooking apples, six weeks from ripening.

Julian wipes his mouth, which is smeared with fat, shiny in the firelight. He looks, for a moment, like a caveman ten thousand years ago. 'Everything,' he repeats.

'There are cameras?' she asks. 'Like in Prague?'

Julian shakes his head, shuddering at the memory. 'No, they record everything in their heads. They have phones in their heads.'

She looks at him sceptically.

It sometimes seems that Julian knows everything, can do anything. He is much older than her. He knows the U well, has spent time on the Isles themselves. He has also travelled the other way, through China and into the gleaming technocracies of the East Coast. He doesn't like to talk about China. On his torso he has a map of China in scars. His left eye was thumbed out by a guard in a prison cell there.

Julian knows things, but sometimes Mila gets the impression he is exaggerating a little to impress her. The stories he tells about the First World can't possibly all be true. He wants her to like him, to admire him, to stay with him for his wisdom and skills. She wonders if he wants her in that *way. But he's always*

kept his distance and protected her. Guardedly, she trusts him. He is a good man.

And she has heard rumours of these phones in their heads before.

The next day, they leave the farmhouse and Julian begins talking again, picking up from where he left off the night before. Mila smiles. They've been travelling together for months, nearly a year in fact, and she is used to his oddities.

'The weakness they have,' he tells her, 'is that they have no crime. They have no poverty, they have no . . . you know, political problems.'

They are walking along a country lane. A rusted tangle of twisted metal and cabling fills the field to their right. An old pylon, brought down during one of the countless wars. Something squeaks in the wind as it swings back and forth. Mila wrinkles her nose at a sudden vile stench, brought their way by the breeze.

'Why is that a weakness?' she asks, squinting up at the blood-red sun, hanging low and bloated over the horizon. It seems to shimmy a little as it sinks, like a fat lady lowering herself onto a stool. Mila is aware that the sun hasn't always looked that colour. It is the emissions that make it look this way. It used to be bright yellow, her teacher told her, in a pale blue sky, and Julian claims it looks like that on the Isles. Mila can't imagine it. To her, the sun is dark orange, or red, in a purple sky.