

# GRAVESEND, OR, EVERYDAY LIFE IN THE ANTHROPOCENE

Paul McAuley

**Paul McAuley has published about two dozen novels and more than a hundred short stories, as well as a *Doctor Who* novella and a BFI Film Classic monograph on Terry Gilliam's film *Brazil*. He became a full-time writer after working as a research biologist in various universities, including Oxford and the University of California, Los Angeles, and as a lecturer in botany at St Andrews University. His first novel, *Four Hundred Billion Stars*, won the Philip K. Dick Memorial Award; his fifth, *Fairyland*, won the Arthur C. Clarke and John W. Campbell Awards. Other works have won the Sidewise Award, the British Fantasy Award, and the Theodore Sturgeon Memorial Award. Gollancz has recently reissued *The Secret of Life* in their Masterworks series. Paul's latest novel, *Beyond the Burn Line*, is an exploration of our post-Anthropocene legacy. His new story for *Asimov's* is set in the same milieu.**

*"The Anthropocene is an epoch of ghosts."*

—Anne McClintock

Rose Hathaway was discharged with a General Service medal, a one-off payment from the Armed Forces Compensation Office, and damage from a psych bomb jangling in her head. Although she was still haunted by glimpses of ghosts and a general feeling of low-level dread that sometimes flared into full-blown panic, the medics in the rehab clinic claimed that her symptoms were either psychosomatic or escalations of preexisting conditions, and no further treatment was possible.

"If they don't think it's real, why are we supposed to keep dosed up with phenelzine?"

her friend Ollie McBride said, when he and Rose were given notice of their discharge. "Mean to say, it's serious old-style pharma—just check out the side effects. Schizophrenia, seizures, sexual dysfunction, suicidal behaviors? And that's not even half the S's. Not to mention we're supposed to avoid soy sauce, sauerkraut, kimchi. . . . Hell with that. Love me some kimchi, no better cure for a hangover."

"So you're going to quit taking it because you're flagging for Korean food?" Rose said.

"Going to taper off, see how it goes. Not saying you should follow my example, Rose of my heart, but you should maybe consider the quality-of-life implications of taking the stuff on the regular."

Ollie had also been in the drone crew taken out by the psych bomb, was always the first to ask questions in group sessions, a tall skinny guy with curly black hair he was growing out, sitting backward on his chair, stabbing the air with a finger as he made his point. He knew his stuff, too. Researched the shit out of it, bothered the medics with questions about alternative treatments, better pharma, and helped Rose get through some bad patches. The day they were discharged, he told her there was no point trying to fight the machine, he was going to make the speed of light out of this place, blow the compensation on a stormer to celebrate his emancipation, and never look back.

"Be sure to come up to Newcastle," he told her. "We'll have us some high old times."

Rose signed the forms and waivers without reading any of them, and just like that, age twenty-two, she was a civilian again. And, like Ollie, she spent the first two weeks tapering off the phenelzine tablets she'd been prescribed, though not because of any craving for contraindicated food. The stuff made her feel like she was at the bottom of a dark, numbingly cold ocean, everything heavy and slow, and she decided to rely on the exercises she'd been taught in therapy sessions instead—mindful breathing, body scans, focused meditation, so on, to keep her on the straight and narrow. In one of the therapy sessions, they'd been told that naming their ghosts would give them some control by making the unfamiliar familiar, and she and Ollie had some rare fun making up silly handles. The Grey Guy, the Poison Dwarfs, Skeletor, Old Rags, for her; Mr. Fog, the Murder Crows, Spikehead for him. Chanting the names like a mantra definitely helped to beat back the fear and panic whenever she glimpsed some malign presence lurking in the 4 A.M. dark of her bedroom or grinning at her amongst the swirl of people in a crowded street, or when a feeling of wrongness began to creep over her, like the aura before a migraine, and her head began to fill with fluttering black wings. But nothing, not mindfulness or mantras, not even the crushing numbness of phenelzine, could entirely exorcise the monsters that the psych bomb had quickened in the attic of her mind. It looked like she was stuck with them forever, and then Ollie told her about the new treatment he'd heard about.

They'd stayed in touch, but just barely, Ollie in Newcastle, Rose back home in Bristol. Brief bouts of messaging back and forth, a few clips. One Ollie sent a couple of days after they were discharged showed him at a street stall eating with stagey relish naeng myun and a side of kimchi, mmm-mmm-mmm. Ollie and his mates in a pub, drunk and noisy, a link to loops of bleepy electronic music he said was helping to keep his thoughts straight. The last was on a bridge over a river, the Tyne, Ollie looking haggard but defiant, saying that he was under some heavy weather, telling Rose about a clinic in the Czech Republic that claimed to have a new treatment for trauma caused by psyops weapons.

"Stupidly expensive, but I'm going to do some deep recon and will send a sitrep soon as. You should definitely, definitely, *definitely* think about looking it up too," Ollie said. He sent details of the clinic's website, but Rose didn't hear anything else until a month later, when his mother called. He'd disappeared without any warning two weeks ago; none of his friends had heard from him, did she have any idea where he might have gone? When Rose mentioned the clinic, Ollie's mother said that she had

already contacted the place, the people there had been helpful but had never heard of Ollie, and besides, he'd left his passport behind. Had gone out to buy some milk one morning and had never come back.

Rose promised that she'd be in touch if she heard from him, but by then she had problems of her own. She'd been living with her parents and trying to get her life straight, but most of her friends had coupled up or moved away, she was running down her savings and having trouble finding a suitable job because of her medical discharge, and things weren't working out at home. Her father was sort of tiptoeing around her, and her mother was forever fussing, bombarding her with suggestions about diets and alternative treatments. When they heard about Ollie's disappearance, her parents doubled down on their suffocating concern, and at last Rose couldn't take any more and went on the drift.

She told herself that she would keep a look out for Ollie, that if she didn't run into him, she might at least find someone who had. Told herself that maybe she'd find a sweet job and save enough to pay for treatment at that clinic. She looked up its website every now and again, studied photos of smiling staff in pink smocks, spacious, sunlit rooms and extensive lawns with distant views of mountains, read and reread descriptions of focused HD magnetic fields and light therapy tailored to the patterns of the patient's brain activity. It was about as reachable as Shangri-La, she knew, but it helped to make plans, tenuous though they were. Made her present troubles tolerable by holding out the hope of better times to come. Gave her life the kind of structure the army had previously provided. She missed that more than she'd thought she would.

The first work she found was in a cricket factory, where millions of the insects were grown, harvested, and dried and milled into cricket flour. Most of the time she didn't see them, because they liked to hide inside the cardboard lattices stacked in long rows inside the factory's industrial sheds, only venturing out to nibble a little food or drink a little water, but knock over one of those lattices or drop one on the floor, and hundreds would swarm out, hopping around or whirring up in panicky little flights. It wasn't hard or especially unpleasant work, but the sheds were windowless and dimly lit and full of shadows where Rose's ghosts like to lurk, keeping her perpetually edgy and giving her several bad scares. After a couple of months, she quit and fell in with Derry Dave, a stocky fellow twice her age with a noble broken nose, a breezy confidence, and a wife and kids back in Ireland. He told Rose about his family almost immediately, and she decided, with only the smallest pang of guilt, that it wasn't a dealbreaker. Dave was good company, patient and sympathetic when she had one of her bad times, which counted for a lot as far as she was concerned, and he knew the best places for picking work along the south coast and taught her some of the tricks of the trade.

"Your first year, you'll suck, and you'll hurt in places you didn't know could hurt," he told her. "But keep at it, and your body will learn what to do, and in a year or so you'll be on your way to being a proper picker."

Pickers were paid piece rates for numbers or weight picked rather than time spent, rewarding skill and speed. Despite Dave's help, Rose never earned more than a quarter of his wages, and many of the regulars on the circuit were even faster. Theirs was a rag-tag, multicultural, mobile community. Families, crews, and drifters sharing crowded accommodation and eating at long tables, close quarters rife with romance and rivalry, friendship and intrigue, that strongly reminded Rose of the army. For some, like her, it was casual work. For others, many of them second-generation DPs, displaced persons, it was a way of life. They traveled routes that followed seasons and harvests, knew which employers to seek out and which to avoid, spent half the year picking in fields and orchards, greenhouses and hydroponic stacks, and the other half working at their own businesses or living large on the credit they'd banked.

Which was why, after sharing some good times for most of the summer, Rose and Derry Dave split up. He was done with picking for the year and was heading back to Ireland, told Rose that he wouldn't mind it if they met up again next spring. She allowed herself to feel flattered, but although it had been fun while it lasted, she didn't want to be his part-time summer girl. After he left, she found work picking in one of the big hydroponic stacks outside Reading, but then she had one of her bad times, a growing thundercloud of dread that culminated in a frighteningly real hallucination of the Poison Dwarfs lunging at her, all teeth and unholy appetite, and she fought with the supervisors who tried to hold her down, and that was that.

With no better idea, she drifted further east, overwintering in a squalid seaside town that had lost its beach to coastal erosion and longshore drift, working in a National Work Service crew demolishing houses as part of a managed retreat scheme. Hard labor in bad weather for the basic wage, a berth in an overcrowded hostel. She hadn't given up looking for Ollie—Derry Dave had plugged her into the pickers' rumor network, and she asked everyone who passed through the hostel if they knew anything about him—but one day, just after Christmas, she was pinged by a round-robin message from Ollie's mother: his body had been found in an abandoned squat in London. It was a real low point in Rose's life, so bad she contemplated going back to Bristol and throwing herself on the mercy of her parents. But she managed to tough it out, and in spring set out on the road again, moving from picking job to picking job and toward the end of summer ending up in a drifter camp in the remains of an industrial park outside Gravesend, on the Thames estuary.

There was good credit to be earned from working in the yards where electronics, tires, plastics, and rare earths were stripped from the carcasses of old cars before they were crushed into little cubes of scrap steel and dispatched to foundries in Libya for reprocessing. Rose planned to spend the winter there, but one night, soon after she arrived, a fight between a couple of men in the camp escalated to an all-out brawl. The derelict office building she shared with a dozen other women was set on fire, and when she retrieved her day bag from its hiding place two of her roommates ambushed and beat and robbed her. Might have done worse if police drones hadn't settled above the riot, flooding it with stark halogen light and firing pellets that spewed CR gas, while sirens twisted up in the distance.

Rose's attackers fled, and Rose fled, too. Her ghosts were everywhere, the whole fucking crew, dancing in flames, looming out of flickering shadows. Half-crazed, running through the dark with no clear idea of where she was going, Rose blundered into a watery maze of pools and inlets and muddy little islands, and that was where Joshua Collins found her the next morning, curled up in a spider hole she'd trampled in a stand of reeds, shivering with fever and the stabbing pain of a broken collar bone. That was how she ended up in the Reach, with Joshua and his merry crew of oldsters, and became tangled up in the affair of the stolen soul chips.

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The Reach stretched along a tidal creek east of Gravesend, an irregular scatter of stilt huts, monocoque floating homes cast from polycomposite or foamed concrete, and reconditioned houseboats and barges flying flags of causes lost or won and mostly forgotten. Solar panels and heat pumps and wind turbines, an industrial printer and a maker tank, greenhouses and vegetable patches, composting toilets and waste digesters, greywater cleaned by reedbeds, dykes constructed from old tires and sandbags—the usual clutter of a twenty-first-century, low-impact, zero waste, carbon negative ecopolder, most of its inhabitants grey-haired Fourth Wavers with deep-dyed loyalty to communitarianism, open networking, and Green New Deal idealism.

One evening, Rose and the usual crew were up on the veranda of Maggie Dowd's shack where the hot, close air was somewhat cooled by a misting system, smoking

weed and drinking tea, or sampling the latest batch of Kayla Brown's cider. Talking freely because end-of-the-day sessions like this were strictly offline, no cams or drones making recordings for private or community diary pieces, no live links to other Fourth Wavers in other communities and collectives. Sharing the small change of their day, scraps of gossip, reminiscences about people and actions and protests in times before Rose had been born. She didn't mind the nostalgia fests. They were comforting background noise, didn't require her to make any contribution. And then Sami Mansoor, who was often up in the village doing odd jobs, mentioned that they'd seen someone moving into Nicole Featherstone's old bungalow. Her nephew, apparently, young fellow about your age, Sami said, looking at Rose. Come down from London with plans to fix up the place.

"First thing he should do is make sure his aunt's ghost has moved on," someone said, and everyone else laughed.

Apart from Rose and Maggie, who were sharing a pot of mint tea, they were all a little stoned, a little tipsy. Rose didn't drink alcohol and didn't much care for weed, either. It was supposed to give you a mellow high, and the oldsters claimed that it also relieved their various aches and pains, but the few times Rose had tried it, she'd felt only a disconcerting fuzziness, a disconnection from her body and from the world a little like the concussion she'd suffered when a stray baton round had wacked the back of her helmet during a training exercise. As far as she was concerned, if you wanted to get spaced, drugs manufactured by tinkered microbes that delivered clean, precisely designed highs via patches or eye drops were far better than inhaling smoke from the burning leaves of weeds grown in dirt.

"Nicole Featherstone, the aunt, was a medium," Joshua told Rose. "She raised ghosts. Talked to the dead."

"Allegedly," Farhad Hassannezhad said.

"And now she's dead, and there's no one to talk to her," Kayla Brown said, which Rose thought was kind of cruel, but most of the oldsters laughed, the conversation drifted to something else, and Rose forgot all about the man who'd moved into the house of the dead woman who'd talked to dead people until, one day in Bartertown, Joshua pointed him out.

By then, Rose had been camping out on the roof of Joshua's Dutch barge for a little over three weeks. She'd recovered from her beating, her broken collarbone, treated at the local clinic with an injection of tinkered stem cells, was almost healed, and she knew she was only a temporary guest. Kayla Brown, who shared an emotional attachment with Joshua that stemmed from some old sexual entanglement, had warned her that she wasn't the first orphan Joshua had taken in. He was softhearted, Kayla said. An idealist who wanted to make other people's lives better, which was absolutely fine, of course, but sometimes the people he tried to help took advantage. Rose told Kayla that she was grateful for Joshua's hospitality and would leave whenever he asked, but that didn't satisfy the old woman, who pursed her lips and said, "We'll see about that. Meanwhile, I'll be watching you, child. So mind your manners, and don't presume."

Rose had done her best to repay Joshua's hospitality, volunteering for menial chores, washing dishes after the communal meals, running clothes and sheets through the community's washing machine, a clunky thing so old it used water, and hanging them out to dry. When she no longer needed to wear a sling for her collarbone, she helped Farhad Hassannezhad, the retired mathematics professor who ran the Reach's intranet, sand down the hull of his rowboat and give it a fresh coat of anti-fouling biogel, and joined the crew who tended the vegetable plots. And every day she went out into the marsh with Joshua, helping him pick the wild plants and fruit and berries he traded in Bartertown.

The work earned only a little credit, because daily quantities of pickings were strictly limited by the terms of Joshua's gleaning permit; Rose's share wasn't much more than pocket money, and she was still a long way from reaching Ollie's clinic. She'd been angry with Ollie when she learned of his death, then scared when she found out that he'd died of a phenelzine overdose. Scared that it hadn't been accidental, scared that his ghosts might have overwhelmed him, scared that it might happen to her. She knew that trying to save enough to pay for treatment at the clinic he'd found was pretty much an unrealizable fantasy, but it was her way of making sense of his death. Of trying to make sure it didn't happen to her.

Now she was more or less fixed up, she knew that she should move on, find some real work and earn some real credit, but truth was, she was comfortable in the Reach. The oldsters were earnest and preachy, and their life choices were supported by resources and privilege that people her age lacked, but they were mostly sweet and mostly meant well, and Rose felt more at ease there, more at home, than anywhere else since leaving the army. Her ghosts hadn't entirely disappeared, but their visitations had dwindled and were generally little more than brief, untroubling glimpses. She was at last in a good place. She was happy.

The day Joshua pointed out Tyler Sleight, the nephew of the dead medium, started like any other. He and Rose set out soon after dawn, the air still relatively cool, fleets of fluffy white clouds, like the clouds in old-time pictures, sailing a blue sky washed clean by rain blown in by a rare Atlantic weather front, the blunt prow of the flat-bottomed skiff pushing up silky folds of black water as the old man steered it through the marsh's maze of creeks and pools. The broad brown flood of the Thames stretching level and calm to the hazy line of the far shore. Birds singing each to each from willow banks and reed beds. Dragonflies zooming across sunlit water like miniature drones blown from stained glass. The vivid green flash of a parakeet. A cargo ship gliding past the edge of the marsh, the tall white columns of its turbines turning in the clean wind, the spreading wash of its wake breaking on the outer mud flats, a flock of flamingos taking flight in an uncurling wave, vividly pink in light as crystalline as the first dawn of a newly created world.

"Days like this," Joshua said contentedly, "you could almost believe that everything lost has been restored."

He was a scrawny, sunburnt geezer in his eighties who had outlived his wife and only child, faded tattoos on his arms and torso commemorating his history of environmental activism. The hourglass symbol of a protest group he'd belonged to. A fuzzy tattoo of a dove carrying in its beak a chicken-foot peace sign, done when he'd been in prison for helping to block a motorway during a nation-wide protest against what he called the Big Oil Economy. A polar bear on an ice floe on one arm, and on the other a bumblebee resting above the number 338, the carbon dioxide concentration in the atmosphere when he'd been born, all the way back in 1982. ("It's a lot higher now, but that's the point.") And across his back, the word HOPE, the O the Earth's globe, to commemorate his role in the Twelfth Climate Justice Conference, when he'd been an advisor to one of the senior politicians in the Fourth Wave Alliance and had helped to write part of the pivotal Hanoi Declaration.

Rose heard about Joshua's contribution to the declaration, and also learned that he had published several science fiction novels, from Abigay Philibert, Farhad Hassannezhad's partner, a large, lively, gossipy woman who oversaw the community's vegetable plots. He doesn't talk about it much, Abigay said, but he was a little bit famous once upon a time, before he gave it all up and helped me and Farhad and the rest of us set up the Reach.

Rose looked up the novels—three short volumes about the adventures of a crew of "weather wranglers" who traveled the world in an airship, not really her thing, but

sort of fun. Joshua said, dismissively and a little defensively, that they were juvenile fantasies about power and control that had scratched an itch when he'd been only a little older than she was now. He'd soon realized that he could best spend his time working in the real world, warning people about the dangers of what was called, back then, the climate emergency, and promoting actions and policies that might stave off the worst possible outcomes.

"We should have done more, no doubt, but at least we managed to forge an alliance between politicians and scientists and activists that put us on the right road," he told Rose. "Even so, changes are still unfolding, and we've had to learn how to make more out of less, to put the wants and needs of the community above the rights of the individual. Perhaps you don't see what we've lost or had to give up, kid, because you grew up in this brave new world, but it was a lot, and it was necessary."

"We were taught about it in history lessons, in school," Rose said. "And my grandmother, Granny Wexler, told me stories about the old days. How you could order anything you wanted on the internet, and everyone drove their own car and flew all over the world."

"Nice way to make me feel old," Joshua said. "But as someone once said, the past isn't even past. My generation received the bill for the unchecked exploitation of the planet, and you, and your children and your children's children, will still be paying for it into the next century and beyond."

That day, though, all seemed right with the world as they picked samphire, sea beet, sea purslane, and scurvy grass from the mud flats. As usual, Rose did most of the work, while Joshua stood in the shade of his black umbrella, barefoot and bare-chested in tattered shorts, pointing out likely patches. Although his mind was still lively and sharp, he admitted that he wasn't quite as spry as he'd once been, what with half a lung having been surgically removed to treat a cancer, his hips and lower spine being held together by coral inserts and titanium screws, his coronary arteries patched by cultured grafts, retinal ditto, and every now and then he was laid low by bouts of what he called backbone fever, stemming from damage to his hypothalamus by a viral infection in one of the pandemics. Old age, he liked to say, was not for the weak.

Rose had lost her set of tempered wood picking knives along with everything else, but as Derry Dave had predicted, her body remembered the habits imprinted by last summer's picking work. She wore a straw hat Joshua had bought for her in Bartertown, and a loose white shirt that reflected the worst of the sunlight, and took frequent small sips from a water bottle to stay hydrated as she cut and plucked and the air grew hotter and heavier, squinting in light burning off the water as she slogged through thick mud that clutched at her waders and gurgled and squished and clicked. The marsh was a living thing. Dynamic. The mud its flesh, the channels and dykes and ditches its arteries and veins, the silty water that rose and fell with the tides its blood. So far it had survived rising sea levels because of careful management and a fortunate redistribution of sediments in the Thames Estuary, but eventually, inevitably, it would be overwhelmed. Seas wouldn't stop rising for centuries to come, and there was still the possibility that catastrophic collapse of glaciers or ice shelves in Greenland and Antarctica would swiftly raise their levels by several meters.

Despite the heat and hard work, Rose loved being out in the marsh, and was mostly able to ignore occasional glimpses of ghosts. She'd told Joshua about the psych bomb and its aftereffects, figuring it best to come clean in case she suffered a serious attack, and also hoping that being wounded in service might win a few pity points. But if he noticed whenever she stopped working, stood still and quiet, gaze fixed on the horizon, until the flutter of a panic attack passed, he never mentioned it, and that morning the only visitation was a shadow that might have been the Grey Guy lurking in a stand of reeds, vanishing when she looked at it directly. Perhaps the

calm, orderly life in the Reach was realigning her brain waves: another reason for not leaving, not just yet.

At last, Joshua called a halt and they shared an early lunch in the shade of a magnolia tree with fleshy white flowers as big as his battered straw hat. Flowers that evolved to be pollinated by beetles, Joshua told Rose, because magnolias had evolved long before bees appeared on the scene.

"I believe you already told me that."

"I did?"

"Once or twice."

"Did I tell you magnolias are garden escapees? Like bamboo, and Russian vine and Japanese knotweed and water hyacinth, any number of exotics."

"You said that if you had your way you'd root them all out," Rose said, but Joshua didn't take any notice.

"You don't remember how it was, kid," he said, getting into one of his grooves. "How it was, and how much has been lost. People have grown too complacent. Accepting that what is, is. Doing nothing or next to nothing and calling it adaptation, or refuge ecology or some such nonsense, when what it really is, is the loss of beauty and diversity to a few aggressive invaders."

He sometimes liked to recall the names of vanished species. Animals and flowers. Insects and birds. Grey seals and otters and Natterer's bats, viviparous lizards and great crested newts. Yellow-horned poppy, small cordgrass, the southern marsh orchid. Cuckoo wasps and common darters and the silver spotted skipper butterfly. Tawny owls and short-eared owls, ospreys and sparrowhawks, skylarks and swifts and spotted flycatchers. . . . Elegiac lists of the lost that were a little like Rose's mantras, except she was trying to drive out her ghosts, while Joshua wanted to make sure that the victims of the Anthropocene weren't forgotten. Things we lost in the fire, he'd say. Casualties of the ongoing Great Thinning. World's so full of holes left by the disappeared, it'll take a million years to fix it.

By the time Rose had spooned up the last of her yogurt, crunching the seeds and dried berries Joshua added because, according to him, yogurt and other foodstuffs whipped up from tinkered bacteria and fungi lacked key micronutrients, the day was even brighter and hotter. They dawdled through mazy creeks in the steamy heat, keeping to the shade of overgrown banks as much as possible, visiting pear trees that yielded the hard little fruit Kayla Brown used to brew her dangerously strong cider, and a lone apple tree, a poor spidery thing suffering from the blight that had wiped out most of the commercial orchards, its unripe apples hard and sour. Joshua ate one and pretended to like it, said that they'd come back next month and have themselves a harvest and make some good credit at Bartertown.

That was where they headed, a hair past noon, their work done for the day. Officially, it was the Cliffe Fort Wet Market, its platforms and cabins cantilevered over the remains of one of the defensive forts built two centuries ago to ward off attacks on London that might have come up river, but none of its regulars ever called it that. Rose and Joshua humped their baskets to the tally office, where a clerk weighed the pickings and added the meager amount of credit, less the market's percentage, to Joshua's phone, and after picking up a few basics at the commissary, they wandered through the open-air market. Buyers from high-end shops and restaurants in London had mostly finished their business and departed in their boats and drone gigs, leaving the locals to barter and bargain for what was left. Joshua took his time, chatting with stallholders, buying a punnet of blueberries at one stall, a handful of punishingly expensive coffee beans in a twist of paper at another, a tinkered strain grown in a hydroponic stack somewhere in Cornwall. Like most of the oldsters, he had an inexplicable jones for the stuff, which had been hugely popular back in the



day, before blight and heatwaves had wiped out plantations in South America, Africa, and Asia. Rose had tried it once: bitter as burnt rubber, even worse with hot potato milk stirred into it, the way Joshua liked it.

A couple of the stalls were especially busy, one selling off a catch of flying fish, the other cuts from the carcass of a nurse shark hung from a wooden frame. A gruesome sight, like an illustration of some kind of torture in olden times when they'd burnt witches. That was where Joshua tapped Rose's shoulder and pointed to someone on the other side of the market, queuing at a stall that sold bread and baked goods made from actual wheat flour.

"Remember the young man we were talking about, who moved here after his aunt died? That's him. Tyler Sleight."

"I remember she was supposed to talk to ghosts," Rose said.

The man was around her age, and easy on the eye. A little like a younger, blond version of Derry Dave, tanned and lean, dressed in a paint-spattered singlet and baggy utility shorts, smiling as he said something to the man behind the stall.

"Apparently, he's fixed up his aunt's old boat, and has been seen out and about in the marshes," Joshua said.

"Are you worried about competition?" Rose said.

"Not at all. He doesn't have a permit, and I've been told that it isn't fruit or fish he's interested in," Joshua said, with a raised-eyebrow look supposed to encourage Rose to ask him what he meant.

"I suppose this is more of your silly gossip," she said.

People came to Bartertown to trade in tales of local rumors and scandals as well as goods, and Rose knew they'd been talking about her, too. On her very first visit, Toby Drury, the warden who enforced regulations and by-laws in the marsh, had appeared at her side after she'd become separated from Joshua, gripping her elbow and telling her that he'd heard she was staying with the folk at the Reach, and hoped she wasn't thinking of causing any trouble. When she tried to front it out, asking him what had given him that idea, he told her that he knew about the spot of bother in the drifters' camp and couldn't help wondering if she'd been involved.

"As I understand it, you were found in a bad way the day after," the warden said.

"I got lost in the marsh, Joshua was kind enough to help me out, and now I'm helping him," she said, wondering if Kayla Brown had put him onto her, this tall, flinty man with a forensic gaze that reminded her of one of her instructors in initial training, lasering into her as he let go of her elbow and told her he would be giving her some serious attention.

Joshua had tried to make a joke of the encounter, saying that locals still thought that folk from the Reach were outsiders who couldn't quite be trusted, and Toby Drury was a local born and bred, but Rose had done her best to avoid the warden after that. The last thing she needed was trouble with the law, even if the law in question wasn't much more than a glorified gamekeeper.

"Apparently," Joshua was saying now, still on the topic of the nephew, "he's been looking for dead people."

Saying it so seriously that Rose couldn't help laughing.

"You think he's some kind of grave robber?" she said.

"Did I ever tell you about the rocket? The one that crashed?"

"I saw it that time Maggie took me pearl fishing," Rose said. Joshua had set her up for that trip, but it must have slipped through one of the holes in his memory.

"Did Maggie tell you about its payload?" Joshua said.

"The soul chips? Most definitely."

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Maggie Dowd was a cheerful, compact person in her late sixties, hair dyed blue

with a white stripe down the center part, old-fashioned glasses with large black frames that she pushed up with her thumb whenever she wanted to look at something interesting. She'd worked for a telecoms company before she retired and was pretty technical, maintaining the filter system that made river water drinkable and the solar panels and heat pumps and wind turbines that supplied the Reach with electricity, and helping Farhad Hassannezhad maintain the community's intranet. She also used pearls from a tinkered strain of freshwater mussel to make earrings and necklaces, and had taken Rose on one of her harvesting runs a couple of weeks ago.

They'd traveled deep into the marsh, visiting what Maggie called dark pools—flooded quarry workings that weren't flushed by the marsh's tides, with deep layers of anoxic water and all kinds of chemicals and heavy metals in the sediments at their bottoms—where Maggie grew tinkered freshwater mussels on hemp ropes hung from plastic floats. The pearls she harvested from the mussels were a mixture of small rough spheres and blunt cylinders, striped or marbled with patterns of black or grey or fawn: pigments derived, Maggie told Rose, from pollutants. All kinds of shit had been dumped in the dark pools back in the day, but the mussels were tough little things that could transform poison into beauty.

The site of the crashed rocket was the last place they visited. Maggie steered her skiff around a sharp bend in a muddy channel, and there it was, lying on a crescent of sere wasteland on the far side of a reach of still, black water. Smaller than Rose had expected, a blunt cone overgrown by grass and thistles and briars burnt brown by the sun, marked by a cluster of tattered sun-bleached pennants atop bamboo poles. Most of its skin was gone, and the remaining panels patched over the bent and crushed hoops and stringers of its framework were stained and rotting from years of bad weather.

Maggie let the skiff drift sideways as they contemplated the wreck, told Rose that before the sky crash there'd been a little spaceport at the northeastern end of the marsh that had launched small commercial payloads, cubesats, flatsats, super-secret military hardware, and so on. This was the remains of one of its rockets, which had suffered a catastrophic failure seconds after lift-off: its motor had flamed out, it had cartwheeled and broken apart, and the nose cone and payload system had ended up here, after scattering its cargo of nanosats across the marsh. The nanosats had been packed with soul chips, so-called, and the soul chips had been loaded with the DNA and AI simulations of people who had believed that, some time in the future, the chips might be retrieved and used to magic copies of themselves back to life.

"It was a crazy long shot, no doubt, but this was just before the collapse, and people were especially crazy back then," Maggie said. "Billionaires were talking about building space habitats in orbit or on the Moon or Mars to escape damage and disasters they'd had a big part in causing. I suppose the soul chips were a cheap alternative, but the sky crash put an end to it. You know what caused that, the sky crash?"

She had this habit of suddenly firing off a question, like an instructor putting you on the spot. Rose didn't much mind it and played along, saying, "Wasn't it something to do with a spaceship exploding?"

And felt an unexpected pang of homesickness, remembering evenings spent with her father on the lumpy sofa, watching old sci-fi films. She'd pinged her parents with her new phone as proof of life and there'd been a little to and fro, the beginnings of a reconciliation, even though her mother couldn't help asking when Rose was coming home, whether she was getting the treatment she needed. Another reason to find a way of getting fixed up, prove that she could look after herself.

Maggie was explaining that the sky crash had been caused by two dead satellites colliding, how the debris cloud had smashed into other satellites, a chain reaction spreading across the sky until it was filled with debris endlessly whizzing around. Which, yeah, pretty much sounded like one of those old films.

“That was the end of space stations and satellites in Low Earth Orbit,” Maggie said. “And the end of all the little low-cost, low-impact spaceports like the one that launched this rocket. It was a shame. Their rockets were smart little reusable beasts with seamless engines that burned renewable biopropane. Lightweight, efficient, and as environmentally friendly as possible.”

“You miss that stuff,” Rose said, thinking of how oldsters, even in the Reach, which was supposedly all about how best to live in the here and now, were haunted by the past. Regretting all they’d lost, unable to let go of what they’d had to live through in the crazy collapse years, guilty about what they’d done or what they’d failed to do.

Maggie telling her now that she’d spent five years helping to develop control systems for a fleet of autonomous, high-altitude dirigibles that had been meant to replace the low-cost satellite internet systems taken out by the sky crash.

“It was a good idea, but didn’t come to anything in the end. Too expensive and too vulnerable,” she said, and tweaked the tiller so the skiff bumped up against a cluster of oil-drum floats. “Anyway, the rocket just missed ending up in this pool and became a waymark for people looking for a place to dump their shit. Pearls here have a nice blue tint. Let’s see if we can find some.”

So that was where Rose first heard about the soul chips, and now Joshua told her that, according to local gossip, they were what the young man, Tyler Sleight, was searching for out in the marsh.

“His aunt was employed by the company that made those chips before she got into the business of talking to dead people. Some say that he has a map she made, or some other kind of insider knowledge.”

“Are these chips like some kind of treasure?” Rose said.

“After the rocket blew up, locals pottering about in the marsh would sometimes turn up one of its nanosats or a couple of the chips, and make a bit of credit by selling their finds. Which means that someone else wanted to buy them,” Joshua said.

“You mean like collectors?”

“Why not? There’s an old rule about sexual preferences and pornography. Which was a big thing on the internet, when the internet was the internet. The rule being, anything you could imagine, no matter how weird or wild, had a website. It’s the same with stuff. Especially old stuff. Anything you can think of, there’s someone, somewhere, who collects it. Even chips imprinted with dead people’s souls,” Joshua said, and went off on one of his tangential grooves, how stories about the soul chips echoed older stories of ghosts and hauntings, and events in the marsh’s deep history, from the Romans to Iron Age tribes, all the way back to roaming bands of Neolithic hunter-gatherers, might have left imprints or psychic resonances. How, it being a wild and lonely place, people’s senses sharpened and their imaginations kicked into high gear, and they saw things they wouldn’t usually see, or things that weren’t really there.

Rose, feeling seen by this talk of ghosts, didn’t pursue the matter of Tyler Sleight and the soul chips. She told herself that he was just another of the eccentrics, castaways, and refuseniks the marsh seemed to attract. Still, the idea that there might be a market for the soul chips stuck with her, feeding fantasies of digging up one of those old nanosats and selling its cargo for a fat price to some rich eccentric collector, enough to pay for treatment in Ollie’s clinic, or some other place that could exorcise her ghosts. . . .

A heatwave rolled over the marsh, riding a massive ridge of high pressure that parked itself across mainland Europe and the south of England. The marsh baked. Joshua and Rose set out on gleaning forays in grey pre-dawn light, the skiff breasting through scarves of mist hovering over water warm as bathwater, mud banks dried into crazed plates that shattered beneath their boots, and abandoned work a couple of hours after the sun had levered itself up from the shimmering horizon and filled the air with furnace heat and light. The Bartertown market was shaded by sails of

brown and blood red canvas and closed early, and the marsh and the countryside around and about drowsed through scorching afternoons and hot, sticky evenings.

It was fire season, and one day a wildfire crackled across tinder-dry heath and woodland to the east of the marsh, punching pillars of smoke into the heat-whitened sky. Rose, Maggie Dowd, Sami Mansoor, and a dozen others from the Reach joined a small army of volunteers who rode in a convoy of buses to a muster point and were issued with long-handled swatters and spent a long day trudging along the fire line, flailing out smoldering ash and nests of crawling sparks and little pockets of flame. They returned to the muster point at dusk, queued at water bowzers to rinse ash and smoke from their hair and skin, and devoured food other volunteers handed out, everyone exhausted and grimy but pleasantly satisfied by their collective effort.

Rose was especially tired, and a headache was needling behind her eyes: for the last couple of hours on the fire line the Grey Guy had been playing peek-a-boo behind scorched hedgerows and Old Rags had been fluttering at the margins of her vision. As she scraped her mostly uneaten meal into the recycler, she spotted Tyler Sleight chatting to a couple of men, and might have nerved herself to go over and talk to him, tried to slide the matter of the soul chips into the conversation. But the buses were kindling their headlights, and marshals were calling out names and destinations, and Tyler Sleight went one way and she went another.

A short train of thunderstorms delivered some relief from the heat. Bruised towers boiling up above the river, drifting inland and darkening the sky as rain swept down and lightning crazed the purple storm light and thunder rolled from one edge of the sky to the other like God's own artillery. The last storm ended in a terrific hailstorm, trees along the Reach threshing, hail hammering on the roofs and decks of the shacks and houseboats and floating homes, seething on the surface of the creek, piling up everywhere in smoking drifts. Abigay Philibert found a hailstone the size of her head and smashed it into chips that she added to cocktails made with lime juice, shavings from the rinds of bitter wild oranges, and white rum from a fellow who had a still hidden in the marsh. Passing tumblers to people who'd been working in the vegetable plots until it was too dark to see, gathering produce from plants trashed by the storm.

The heat returned, implacable, inescapable. Nights were scarcely cooler than the day; Rose lay sleepless and sweating on her pad on the barge's roof, the rigid patterns of the stars burning bright and close, pieces of debris in the shell wrapped around the sky faintly twinkling and flashing as they tumbled in long arcs from east to west. Sometimes she glimpsed the brief scratch of a meteor, made a wish. Keep me safe. And keep Joshua safe, too, so I don't have to leave this place just yet. And when it's time, let me find a way to get to the Czech Republic and let everything Ollie said about that clinic come true.

One evening, as Rose and the oldsters relaxed in gusts of cooling mist on the veranda of Maggie's shack, Sami Mansoor mentioned that the new kid up in the village had asked them to do a little work. Rose, as usual sort of dozing in the shadows at the outer edge of the gathering, perked up and asked Sami did they mean Tyler Sleight.

"Only new kid in town I know of," Sami said. A lively pixie in their late fifties with a quick, mischievous smile and an addiction to gossip, they sprawled bonelessly in a deck chair, a carton of beer resting on the swell of their belly.

"I wouldn't mind giving you a hand," Rose said. Sort of blurting it out without thinking it through, then having to listen to the others making a joke of it. It was time she found someone of her age, she was finally tired of us oldsters, better watch out, she's on the prowl, so on.

"Cut the sexist bullshit. I'm just trying to help out," she said, and looked at Joshua, hoping for a little support. "Maybe I'll find out what he's really up to, out in the marsh."

“It’s just a couple of trees need trimming,” Sami said. “But if you want to come along and can keep your curiosity under control, why not?”

The next morning, the new sun glowering behind the veils of smoke from wildfires on the other side of the river, Rose rode with Sami on their buzzy little electric scooter, a wood chipper hitched behind, to a bungalow at the eastern end of the nearby village. It perched at the edge of the old cliffs above the marsh, in a garden gone to weeds dried brittle and brown in the long summer heat. Its roof had been stripped back to battens over tarpaper, and someone—it was Tyler Sleight, blond and tanned, bare-chested in dark blue running shorts—waved to them from the ridge.

While Sami and Rose hauled the wood chipper into the back garden, Tyler Sleight climbed down from the roof and brought out a pitcher of water and three mismatched tumblers. Rose was tall, but he was taller, with a nice smile and a cheerful manner, explaining that he’d cut back the bushes and weeds, but the trees were a bit too much for one person to deal with, so he’d called in someone who knew what they were doing.

There were four of them, eucalyptus trees grown tall and wild, their pleasant medicinal scent tinting the baked air, the ground beneath a crackling carpet of dry leaves. Sami uncoiled lengths of rope and unsheathed their chainsaw and clambered around the treetops with impressive agility, and Rose fed severed branches into the wood chipper’s maw, harder work than she’d expected, what with pulling them out and shoving them back in whenever the wood chipper jammed. By the time the job was finished, her arms and shoulders were aching, the gloves Sami had lent her were stiff and sticky with sap, and there was a huge pyramid of fragrant woodchips on the patch of bare earth that might have once been a lawn.

After she’d helped Sami pack up and Tyler had dashed them payment for the work, Rose said that she’d hang around the village for a little while; she hadn’t had a chance to see it before.

“Nothing much to see,” Sami said. “And it’s a long walk back and it isn’t going to get any cooler.”

“I’ll be fine,” Rose said.

Sami looked at Tyler, looked at her, and said, “I bet.”

They didn’t actually wink, but the impression was there.

“I’m surprised we haven’t run into each other before,” Rose told Tyler, after Sami had pattered off on their scooter. “I heard you like to go out in the marsh, and I’m out there almost every day.”

“I’ve seen you in the market, with that old guy.”

“Joshua. He told me about the crashed rocket. The one that was carrying soul chips?” Rose said, deciding she might as well get right to it.

“Oh, I know all about the rocket,” Tyler said.

He had a nice, easy smile. Rose was pretty sure that he’d guessed what she was working up to, but she pushed on anyway.

“Joshua told me that you might be looking for some of those chips. I know the marsh pretty well, me and Joshua roam all over. If you need any help, I could give you a hand.”

Tyler studied her for a moment, then said, “Why don’t I make some tea? It’ll have to be lemon balm, it’s all I have.”

“One of my favorites,” Rose said, although she was pretty certain that she’d never had lemon balm tea before.

They perched in a wedge of shade on the rickety decking behind the bungalow. A fresh view of marsh and sky beyond the pollarded trees, two widely separated columns of smoke rising from the river’s far shore. A feeling that they were at the edge of the world. Tyler told her that he was fixing up the place as best he could, doing most of the work himself because he was short of credit, hoping that a basic

do-over would raise the price. "Otherwise, I won't have much left over after taxes. Property around here isn't worth anything."

"You're going to sell the place? You aren't staying on?"

"I thought about it," Tyler confessed. "But I have work and a life back in London."

He said that he and his aunt hadn't been close, he'd had no idea she was going to leave the bungalow to him. He'd mostly seen her on summer holidays, when his family stayed at a caravan park outside Gravesend and made the obligatory round of visits to relatives.

"You wouldn't believe the number of cousins I had," he told Rose. "Most of them pretty old. I mean, I was a kid, everyone seemed old, but they really were. I remember sitting in a corner of a living room crowded with all these ancient monuments I scarcely knew, my mother spending what seemed like hours talking with them about people I'd never heard of, and things that happened a hundred years ago."

"I know the feeling," Rose said.

"I suppose you're staying with that old guy, Joshua. The one taught you so much about the marsh."

"Sort of," Rose said, and felt the need to clarify that. "He lets me sleep on the roof of his barge. Down in the Reach? That's how I know Sami. They live there, too."

"Is he a relative of yours? Joshua, I mean."

"He's a friend. And are you trying to change the subject?"

"I don't know. What was the subject?"

"What you're looking for, out in the marsh."

"Despite what you've heard, it isn't soul chips. Sorry to disappoint."

"I should have known better than to listen to gossip," Rose said.

She was embarrassed, and also disappointed. Hadn't realized until now how much she wanted the rumor about soul chips to be true, to have a chance of making some real credit.

Tyler twitched one of his shoulders in a sort of shrug, as if to say it didn't matter. "What I am doing," he said, "is making field recordings. Wind, water, birdsong. Ambient noise."

He was a sound engineer for a production company that made TV shows, it turned out. Rose asked if the recordings of birdsong and so on were for his work, and Tyler said no, they were for his music.

"I manipulate samples, distort them, loop them. . . . Find a rhythm in something and go with it." He seemed a little embarrassed, told Rose he didn't often talk about it.

"Maybe you could play me something," she said.

"Maybe. If I ever finish the piece I'm working on. Anyway, that's what I've been up to, out there."

"Nothing to do with ghosts. Or soul chips."

"Not in the marsh. Of course, right here in the house, that's a different story," Tyler said, flashing that smile of his again.

Rose couldn't tell if he was serious or having fun with her, but she was enjoying the to and fro, and wishing that she didn't stink of sweat, that her arms and face weren't filthy with dirt and tree sap.

She returned his smile and said, "Are you telling me this place is haunted?"

"If you know about the soul chips, I guess you must also know what my aunt did for a living."

"Could she really talk to the dead?"

A little dent appeared between Tyler's eyes as he gave this some serious consideration. "She comforted the living. I know that. They needed, I don't know, closure or something. And that's what she gave them."

"A way to manage their grief," Rose said, to show that she understood.

Tyler nodded. “I don’t know whether she could talk to the actual dead, but in a way she definitely did, because she used a soul chip in her séances. Maybe that’s where that rumor of yours came from. Some spiritual advisors have angels or shamans, sacred elders or what they call ascended masters. My aunt had a simulation of a woman called Amy Greenway.”

“That was a person who had the soul chip made,” Rose said, her hope twitching again, not quite dead after all.

“Who the chip was made for,” Tyler said. “Amy Greenway’s chip was stolen when someone broke into the bungalow, after my aunt died, but I found where she kept her spares. So if you want, I can show you how it works.”

The room where Nicole Featherstone had held her séances was small and dark, lined floor to ceiling with purple drapes. Thick black carpet, four ladder-back chairs and a little round table at the center, faint lights wandering across the ceiling when Tyler flipped a wall switch.

“It’s kind of tacky, I know, but Nicole once told me that an important part of a séance was setting the scene,” he told Rose. “Part of that, the setup is voice activated, I have to say this particular phrase.”

“I promise I won’t laugh,” Rose said.

Truthfully, the faint smears of light sliding around overhead like the ghosts of Joshua’s lost birds were already creeping her out. She wouldn’t have been surprised to see one of her own ghosts lurking in the shadowy folds of the drapes.

Tyler straightened his back, suddenly looking serious, and said, with theatrical emphasis, “Is there anyone there?”

The lights crawling over the ceiling blinked out and a woman’s voice said, “Who are you? Who wants to know?”

Rose’s arms prickled as the fine hairs lifted, and she felt a touch of dread, like the onset of one of her times, creeping into the back of her head.

“That isn’t the ghost,” Tyler told her. “It’s a sound clip. Part of the show. The ghost comes next. Ready?”

“Bring it on,” Rose said, although her feeling of dread was definitely growing.

“I ask you to show yourself,” Tyler said, in his theatrical voice.

A spinning ball of light kindled in front of them, a woman’s voice—a different woman—said, “Who are you? Where am I?” and shadows in the four corners of the dark little room gained substance and with a sudden rush swarmed over Rose, and she was on her back, looking up at little blurred stars crawling across a black sky. No, the sky was a ceiling, and she remembered where she was and the woman’s plaintive confused voice, and now Tyler’s face was looming over her and he was asking her if she was all right.

She had a headache, and the taste of metal in her mouth. A familiar sense of wrongness. She pushed up on her elbows and said, “I think so.”

“You gave me a scare. I was about to call the medical center.”

“Some of that lemon balm tea might help,” Rose said, and a few minutes later, as they sat on either side of the table in the kitchen, she found herself telling Tyler about the psych bomb.

She’d been a tech corporal in 29 Close Support Squadron. Part of the allied force in Morocco, pushing back far-right nationalist forces that wanted to overthrow the legitimate government and expel all the displaced persons in the country’s camps. 29 Close Support was tasked with supplying troops scattered across a long front line in the Anti-Atlas Mountains, and Rose and her crew had been supervising semiautonomous Pelican cargo drones when they’d been targeted by insurgent psyops, saturating their command center with pulsed, highly focused microwave energy and hacking their virtual reality headsets, weaponizing optical displays with subliminal

images and bursts of light and sound that hit everyone on the link with panic, loss of motor control, and temporary blindness, and in some caused permanent damage.

"I was one of the people who were badly affected," Rose told Tyler. "And I still get spells. Sometimes see things that aren't there."

"And my aunt's rig triggered you," Tyler said. "I'm sorry."

"It's hardly your fault. And I'm all right now." It wasn't quite true, but she was feeling a little better. She drank a little lemon balm tea and said, "So that was what a soul chip does. Shows you the fake ghost of a real dead person."

"Her name is Eunice Ofemile. And she might not be dead," Tyler said. "There are eight people with that name living in England. More I guess in other countries. Especially Nigeria—Ofemile is a Nigerian name."

"You looked her up," Rose said, wondering if he had also thought of selling the chip.

Tyler ducked his head, as if embarrassed. "I was curious. Didn't take it any further than that."

Still, Rose believed that it was a new and interesting wrinkle. Eunice Ofemile might want that chip back. Might want to buy it off Tyler. And he'd said something about finding his aunt's spares, so there must be more of them knocking around. . .

She said, "So if that chip isn't from the crashed rocket, how did your aunt get hold of it?"

"She worked for Athanasia, the company that made them. When it shut down and she lost her job, she sort of borrowed some of the inventory, along with a projector setup and a copy of the software that makes it work. I don't exactly know what people have been telling you, but that's all there is to it. Sorry to disappoint."

"But someone thinks those chips are valuable. They broke in, stole the one your aunt had been using."

"They stole a bunch of things, not just the chip."

"But they didn't take the hardware. The projector setup."

Rose was wondering if the chip had been stolen to order, who had bought it.

"I guess because old electronic gear doesn't fetch much," Tyler said. "The police weren't especially interested, and I actually got some of the stuff back—someone walking their dog found it dumped in a ditch outside the village."

"Can I see it? The setup, and the soul chip."

"Are you sure you're up to it?"

"As long as you don't switch it on again."

It was hidden behind the drapes in the séance room: a lunchbox-sized server, cables running to speakers, laser projectors up in the corners of the ceiling. Tyler pulled the soul chip from the back of the server, handed it to Rose: a chunky rectangle of slightly greasy black plastic with gold contacts in a recess at one end, a pair of red LEDs at the other. It wouldn't be easy to spot one, out in the marsh, but it wouldn't be impossible, either.

Tyler said it hadn't been hard to figure out how the setup worked—it helped that his aunt had let him sit in on a séance one summer. "I know it all looks fake and cheap," he said, "but it was pretty impressive, the way she used it."

"It definitely made an impression on me," Rose said.

It was past two in the afternoon now, too hot to walk back to the Reach, even if she wasn't still feeling woozy, so she ended up staying for a late lunch, corn cobs grilled on an old barbeque just outside the kitchen door, potato salad. Tyler told her about life in London; she gave an abbreviated version of how she'd ended up camping out on the roof of Joshua's barge in the Reach, said that she couldn't stay there forever, and was trying to figure out her next move.

"The army couldn't fix me up, but there's a clinic in the Czech Republic that might



be able to do something,” she said, deciding to make her pitch. “Trouble is, the treatment is madly expensive. That’s why, when Joshua told me that you might be searching for the cargo of that crashed rocket, I had this stupid idea about helping you.”

“You must really want to get cured,” Tyler said sympathetically.

“I got carried away,” Rose said. “But there still might be a way of making some credit. If Eunice Ofemile is still alive, she might want that chip back. And Joshua told me locals sold some of the chips they found, after the rocket crash. So maybe there are people who collect them, and I could find someone who could take the ones you found off your hands.”

“You really think they’re worth anything?”

“The person who broke in and stole one thought so.” Rose watched Tyler think about this and said, to jog things along, “I wouldn’t ask if I wasn’t desperate.”

“I did wonder about trying to trace the people who had them made,” Tyler said. “So I could give them back. Give, not sell. I’d feel funny about taking any credit.”

“You don’t have to decide anything now,” Rose said, thinking that if she tried to force the issue he’d probably say no, and that would be that. “Let’s see if I can find out anything about this company, Athanasia, and its clients. If I do, we can talk again.”

It was early in the evening when she got back to the Reach; Joshua and the usual crew were up on Maggie’s veranda, talking and drinking and smoking. She’d been planning to ask the old man if he knew anything about the kind of people who might want to buy the chips, but it had been a long day and a long walk home in stifling heat, and she was still fuzzy from her reaction to Eunice Ofemile’s ghost, so she flaked out rather than join the party, didn’t raise the matter of Tyler’s aunt and the soul chips until she and Joshua were out in the marsh the next morning.

“I couldn’t help noticing that you came back long after Sami did,” Joshua said, when she mentioned Tyler’s name.

“We got to talking about his aunt’s séances,” Rose said. “Tyler showed me this set-up she’d built, how it animated a version of the person stored in a soul chip.”

“So he is interested in them.”

“Not so very much. And he didn’t find them in the marsh. His aunt worked for the company that made them, like you said, and got hold of some of its gear when the company went bankrupt.”

Joshua thought about that. He was wearing a khaki short sleeve shirt and tattered shorts and handmade sandals with soles carved out of old tires, sitting with the handle of the skiff’s motor under his arm as he steered it along a broad channel between beds of tall reeds. At last, he said, “It would seem that your story is more of a caper than a quest. Young Tyler has valuable soul chips, but may not want to sell them. You have to persuade him to change his mind, or find another way of getting hold of them.”

“After the aunt died,” Rose said, determined not to get sidetracked, “someone broke into her bungalow and stole one of the chips. The one in her projector setup, they didn’t find the others. If there’s a market for the chips, collectors or whatever, I was wondering if you know how I could make contact.”

“Have you persuaded your young man to sell them?”

“He’s thinking about it,” Rose said, telling herself that it was kind of sort of true. “And there isn’t anything between us, except in your fantasies.”

“Selling the ghosts he’s inherited might help you get rid of the ghosts that are haunting you. It’s all rather neat, isn’t it?” Joshua said, and shivered once, all over, like a dog shaking water from its coat.

“Are you all right?”

“I might have overindulged on Kayla’s new batch of cider last night.”

Joshua asked Rose to fetch out his bag, swallowed two painkillers, and said that

he didn't know anything about collectors of soul chips, but perhaps her friend's aunt knew one, or one knew of her.

"Because that chip may have been stolen to order," Rose said. "I wondered about that. But Tyler doesn't know who took it, and he said the police weren't helpful."

"Even so, it's what they used to call a lead. If I were you, I'd start by trying to find some of the aunt's friends and associates. Especially any who also worked for the company that made the chips."

"I looked it up," Rose said. "While you were still dead to the world. It was located right here, in Gravesend, but it went bust eighteen years ago, I don't suppose there's anything left of it now. And I didn't find much else. Mention of it in a news item about that crashed rocket. A picture of a promotional leaflet. Nothing useful."

"The internet isn't what it once was, but Farhad might be able to help you track down a little more. And find out if anyone is asking after the soul chips, too," Joshua said, and shivered again, head to toe.

"Are you okay?"

"I think we should head back," Joshua said, but he'd barely got the skiff turned around when he started to shake so badly that Rose had to grab the tiller and cut the motor before they rammied into a mud bank. He didn't put up any resistance when she took charge, sat hunched and shivering as she headed back to the Reach, and was pretty much comatose by the time they docked. Maggie Dowd helped her steer him to the barge, and they were settling him in his bunk bed when Kayla Brown came rattling down the steps and took over, Maggie steering Rose out of the cabin as Kayla, kneeling beside the bed, began to tenderly unbutton Joshua's shirt.

\* \* \*

A doctor from the clinic in Gravesend paid a visit and prescribed a tailored anti-inflammatory, and Kayla organized a rotating vigil that excluded Rose, but late in the evening, when most people in the Reach were asleep, she snuck into the barge's living quarters. Joshua was asleep or unconscious, shrunken and frail under a clean white sheet. Looking his age. Maggie, who was sitting with him, said that all they could do was wait it out and hope for the best, and her grave look just about sank Rose's heart.

Unable to think of any other way of helping out, she took Joshua's skiff into the marsh the next day, cutting samphire and collecting windfall pears and a basket of the hard sour apples. She couldn't sell her pickings at Bartertown, what with not having a gleaning permit, but she hoped to win some points by contributing to the Reach's communal larder. As she cruised the creeks, selfish thoughts about what would happen if Joshua died kept intruding. No way she could stay on at the Reach if he did, that was for damn sure. She'd be expelled from paradise, homeless, jobless, only a handful of credits on a crappy phone that wasn't really hers, no way of ever getting to the Czech Republic. She thought of Tyler and the soul chips. It was too soon to try to talk him around, but maybe if she did a little more digging, as Joshua had suggested, asked Farhad Hassannezhad to help her find a market, a collector. . . . And if the worst happened, if Joshua didn't get any better and she was kicked out of the Reach and Tyler refused to do the right thing, then maybe she'd be justified in finding out where he was hiding the damn chips and confiscating them.

When Rose returned to the Reach and boarded Joshua's barge, Kayla Brown came out of the bedroom and told her that she mustn't disturb him, he was running a high fever and needed his rest.

"I brought some of the apples he likes," Rose said. "And pears for your cider, and a few bunches of samphire, too."

"Leave it all with me and let him sleep," Kayla said unyieldingly. "Go on now."

Farhad Hassannezhad wasn't especially accommodating either, listening to Rose's

story and telling her that he'd look up sellers and buyers of soul chips when he had a moment to spare, but she shouldn't expect much.

"Back in the day, trade in this kind of thing would most likely have been on the dark web. Hard to search, full of traps for the unwary. And now the dark web is as shattered and broken as the internet, fragments and polders and walled gardens that have to be checked one by one. Very time-consuming and not without its dangers."

"Does that mean you can't really help me?"

"It means that you should manage your expectations and cultivate a little patience," Farhad said.

With nothing better to do, Rose spent the next morning in the vegetable plots, working off some of her frustration by hacking at weeds. Toward noon dark clouds boiled up, the temperature dropped, and after a couple of thunderclaps a heavy rain smashed down. While oldsters who'd been working in the plots took shelter in the equipment shed, Rose gave herself up to the battering downpour, arms outstretched, her face turned up to the sky. But in less than ten minutes the rain stopped as abruptly as it had begun, the clouds sailed east and the sun beat down, and the air, briefly refreshed, quickly grew steamy again.

The heat was like a wet towel wrapped around her head, heavy and constricting, and she didn't like the way some of the oldsters looked at her when she took a seat at the communal lunch table, was unnerved when Kayla Brown, just oh so casually passing by, paused to exchange a few words with Farhad and Abigay. Suddenly, she needed to get away from the suffocating heat and feeling that she was being watched and judged, and she borrowed Joshua's skiff again and took it out along a channel at the edge of the marsh.

A salty breeze gave some relief from the heat; the empty sky and the flat unpopulated sweep of the marsh gave her a calming sense of perspective. Apart from a few ships scattered across the broad sweep of the river, and distant threads of smoke from the fires that had broken out in the Great Buckland reforestation scheme, she might be a lone survivor of some final catastrophe. No sound but rippling water, rustling grasses, random birdsong.

It was a false, fugitive peace. She'd grounded the skiff on one of the outer mud banks and was picking some choice specimens of sea purslane, thinking that she could take them back to Farhad, a little gift, an excuse to ask if he'd made any headway with his search, when she felt the prickling sense of a malign presence at her back. She turned, thinking it was one of her ghosts, and saw a trim launch purring down the creek, the warden, Toby Drury, at the helm, sounding his siren and setting off the flashers on the launch's lightbar when he saw that she'd spotted him.

Rose didn't ask how he'd found her—she was pretty sure that she knew who'd ratted her out. He took her back to Bartertown, towing the skiff behind his launch, and in his office filled out a citation and flashed a copy to her phone. A spot fine for collecting plants without a permit, payable within thirty days, he said, or else she would have to stand in front of a magistrate.

"I should charge you with taking that skiff without permission, too. But Joshua gave you a pass."

"You shouldn't have bothered him—he's not well."

"You should be grateful that he spoke up for you. This would be a very different conversation if he hadn't."

"What if I can't pay the fine?"

"Since this is your first offense—the first I know of, at any rate—you'll most likely be given a couple of hundred hours of community service. No shame in working off your debt that way."

Rose was tempted to say community work was exactly what she'd been doing out

in the marsh, collecting food for the oldsters in the Reach, keeping Joshua's business going while he was sick, but thought better of it. In her experience, there was never any point trying to debate points of morality after you'd been caught dead to rights.

"I've never been afraid of work," she said. "Are we done here?"

"Unless there's anything else you'd like to confess."

"Nothing that concerns you," she said, wondering if he'd been told about her interest in soul chips, too.

Toby Drury studied her for a moment, swinging gently back and forth in his chair. "If you don't pay the fine, you'll be sent a court date. Don't miss it, or you'll be in real trouble. And tell Joshua he's in my thoughts."

A few stalls in the market were still open. Rose bought a twist of coffee beans before retrieving the skiff and heading back to the Reach. She was walking toward Joshua's barge when Maggie Dowd intercepted her and told her that people had heard about her arrest, and there'd been a call for a special meeting. "It's a tempest in a teapot if you ask me, but some thank you should be asked to leave."

"I wasn't doing anything I haven't done a hundred times before, with Joshua. And if Kayla wants me gone, she should ask me to my face," Rose said, certain that the woman had spread the news of her arrest as well as ratting her out to Toby Drury.

Maggie didn't deny it, saying, "It sucks, I know, but it's how things are handled, here. You can put your case at the meeting, and some of us will speak for you, too."

"Don't think I'm not grateful for that, but I think I'll skip it," Rose said. She wasn't especially angry about Kayla's petty jealousy. It was pitiable, really, and sort of exhausting, and besides, there might be a way of turning this to her advantage. "It's about time I moved on, anyway. But can I at least see Joshua, and say goodbye?"

The old man was asleep and though Rose wanted to thank him for standing by her, she didn't have the heart to wake him. She wrote a note instead, handed it and the twist of coffee beans to Sami Mansoor, who was sitting with him, and threw her stuff together and walked out of there. It felt good, leaving on her own terms with her back straight and her head held high, but she had plenty of time to regret her impulsiveness during the long walk in the late afternoon heat toward the village. Tyler Sleight didn't seem especially pleased to see her, opening the door halfway after she knocked, saying that she had some nerve, coming back.

"If it's about my run-in with the warden, it wasn't anything. A lot of fuss about a handful of sea purslane."

"Sea purslane?"

Tyler was dressed in shorts and a ratty T-shirt. Speckles of white paint on his face, a streak of white paint in his hair. Confusion softening his hard look.

"My friend Joshua is ill," Rose said. "And the warden caught me out in the marsh on my own, gleaning without a permit."

"What about the chip?"

"What chip?"

Now it was Rose's turn to be confused.

"I didn't report it to the police because I figured that you took it out of desperation," Tyler said. "And if you've had a change of heart, come to give it back, you can keep it. You obviously need it more than me."

"You've been burgled again," Rose said. "And you thought it was me."

"It wasn't?"

"Cross my heart and hope to die, as my granny used to say."

"You can understand why I thought it might have been," Tyler said. "Since you were so interested in the chips. So keen on selling them."

"I do admit to being a little bit desperate. But I'm not a burglar."

Tyler smiled. Not the full wattage, but enough to let Rose know he believed her.

She said, "Why don't you let me in, and tell me everything."

It had happened two days ago. The day after Rose had been laid out by the demonstration of the séance setup. Tyler had gone to Gravesend to buy more paint, he'd forgotten to lock the back door, and someone had walked in and taken the chip, Eunice Ofemile's chip, and made a mess everywhere else, presumably looking for more.

"Did they find any?" Rose said.

Tyler shook his head. "The creepiest part is that they must have been watching me. They knew I had another chip. Knew I used the setup."

They were sitting at the kitchen table, sunlight hot and bright behind drawn blinds with a faded floral pattern. Rose poured a fresh tumbler of water from the sweating pitcher, her third, and said, "Have you told anyone else about the chips?"

"I did try to find out what they might be worth," Tyler said. "I suppose that might have alerted someone."

Rose felt a pang of sympathy. The poor guy, caught up in something he didn't understand. Traffic in dead people's souls. Weird collectors. Cultish stuff.

"I think I might be able to help you," she said.

"Is that why you came back?"

"Also, I had to move out of the Reach," Rose said, and explained about Joshua's illness, how some people in the community wanted to kick her out after she'd got into trouble with the warden over a few plants.

"If you let me stay here for a few days, I'll see what I can find out about the market for chips, who wants to buy them. A friend of mine knows all about the dark web, where things like that are sold," she said, although she wasn't sure that Farhad had found anything useful, or even if he was on her side anymore. "I'm sure we can sort something out."

"I don't know if I want to sell the rest to this thief."

"But you were thinking of selling them to someone. That's why you wanted to find out what they were worth."

"You're still thinking of getting to . . . where was it?"

"A clinic in the Czech Republic. And now there's a fine I have to pay, too. Not to mention finding a place to stay, if you won't have me."

"I'm not planning to kick you out," Tyler said.

"And you'll let me try to sell the chips for you."

"I would like to get rid of them," Tyler said. "Not so much for the credit, it's just that it's kind of creepy, having them here. Because, you know, they're people, sort of. And I don't want to take them with me after I sell the place, either. So, what's our first move?"

"Do you have your aunt's phone?"

"And her tablet. The phone is locked, but the tablet isn't."

"My friend, the one who knows about the dark web, might be able to unlock the phone. But show me the tablet first."

"What are you looking for?"

"I'll tell you when I find it," Rose said.

There was a small library of books and music in the tablet, invoices and spreadsheets for taxes and bills, an email cache stuffed with expired ads and junk mail, and thousands of photographs, mostly the old static kind. Views of the marsh from the bungalow's garden in every season and every kind of weather. Hundreds of pictures of clouds, plants and sunsets. Several views of the séance room, curtains overexposed in flash glare. Selfies with people who might be clients, others with members of the aunt's family, including younger versions of Tyler. Rose realized that she hadn't seen an image of Nicole Featherstone before. She was, had been, a small, slim woman, blond hair in a neat bob in early photos, longer and brushed straight in later ones.

In one photo, she was smiling arm-in-arm with the taller, younger woman who, according to Tyler, had been her partner. They'd had some kind of horrible breakup, and that had been that for relationships as far as Nicole was concerned. She'd never spoken of her partner again and seemed to have deleted all the other photos of her, retaining this one, perhaps, to remind her of that part of her life.

"Keep scrolling back," Tyler told Rose. "There are photos from when she was working at Athanasia, too."

Rose soon found them. Christmas and Diwali and Eid-ul-Fitr parties, a cake for a birthday, several leaving parties and some kind of bonding exercise on a treeless moor. The same faces in different combinations, but who were they?

Tyler said that as far as he knew Nicole hadn't kept in touch with her work colleagues, and none of them had turned up at the funeral. Only the family and her friend from the village.

"What friend?" Rose said.

"Annie Truit. She helped to arrange the funeral, brought me food when I first moved in here."

"Does she know about the soul chips? Or that you got the séance setup working again?"

"I don't see how she could have anything to do with this. She's a nice old lady, used to be a teacher in a primary school, hopes I'll move in rather than sell the place. Keeps talking about how much Nicole loved it, how it should be kept in the family."

"Even so, I think we should talk to her."

"I suppose I could give her a call, invite her around."

"Better still," Rose said, in full girl detective mode, eager to get things moving and salvage what otherwise had been a shitshow of a day, "why don't we pay her a visit now?"

\* \* \*

Annie Truit's bungalow was painted white, white walls and a white stepped roof, the kind that collected rainwater, and screened from the road by a rampant bougainvillea hedge. The first thing she said, after Tyler had introduced her to Rose, was that it was such a shame that he had cut down Nicole's trees.

"They're still there," Tyler said affably. "Just trimmed back a little, so I can enjoy the view."

"The view is nice, but you might miss their protection from weather when it turns. As it does. Part of the fun living here," Annie told Rose. "It's like being out at sea sometimes, in the wind and the rain."

She was a stout broad-hipped woman in an ankle-length tent dress fashioned from layers of pastel gauze, leading Rose and Tyler to a patio at the rear of the bungalow, fetching olives and dips and seaweed crisps, sitting down and then standing up again, bringing out glasses she'd forgotten to bring out the first time around, picking an orange from a potted tree and breaking it open and insisting Rose and Tyler taste the segments. She saw Rose looking at the tilted barrel of an astronomical telescope at the other end of the patio, said that it was her late husband's, he had worked at the spaceport before it closed, and she liked to watch the stars and the Moon when the sky was clear, it was so nice and dark out above the marsh.

"That's all we can do after the sky crash—look up and wonder," she said, and added, as if the link was perfectly logical, that it had been such a shock when Nicole had died. "She had been ill for some time with what the doctors called environmental onset lupus. Problems with her joints and her kidneys and her skin. It slowed her down, but she didn't let it stop her. She was always busy keeping up her home and garden, and she'd visit me or call almost every day, or I'd go over to see her. She was a good friend. Had a good heart," Annie said, placing a hand flat over her own.

Rose said, "After she fell ill—was she still holding séances?"

“She stopped traveling to appointments, but she had regulars who’d come over for sessions. There was one the week before she passed. I don’t suppose,” Annie said to Tyler, “that you’ve had any more thoughts about carrying on the family tradition.”

Tyler smiled and shoulder-shrugged and said that he didn’t have his aunt’s talent, missing a chance to get down to the point of the visit, so Rose chipped in, asking if Nicole had made any enemies with her work, if she had any professional rivals.

“If she did, she never mentioned it to me,” Annie said.

“We were also wondering,” Rose said, “if you knew any of the people she worked with in Athanasia, before she became a spirit guide.”

“That was before she moved here. Seventeen, no eighteen years ago, after the sky crash and the beginning of the collapse. Everyone talks about how bad things were in the cities, but we had our share of troubles. Blackouts and rationing, of course, and roving gangs stealing animals and crops. Farmers had to hire armed guards, and our parish council organized a local watch. Even so, we did our best to help each other, and people less fortunate, too. There was an unofficial camp of people made homeless by the floods in London, and we set up a soup kitchen for them in the old tin tabernacle, the Baptist chapel as was. That’s when I first got to know your aunt,” Annie told Tyler. “She was one of the volunteers.”

“We found some photos,” Rose said. “We were wondering if you might recognize any of the people in them.”

“We’re trying to get in touch with any of her old friends who haven’t heard about her,” Tyler said, trotting out the excuse he and Rose had concocted.

Annie diligently studied the photos as Tyler shuffled through them, and at last pointed out one woman.

“She sometimes visited when Nicole first moved here. Lucy, no, Luisa. Luisa something. She had a daughter, a very sweet girl not much younger than you, dear,” Annie told Rose. “I haven’t seen her for years and can’t bring her last name to mind, and I don’t know if she ever worked with Nicole, but she was definitely called Luisa.”

There was a Luisa in the address book of the email app in Nicole’s tablet. Luisa, no last name. Rose and Tyler worked up a message and sent it, but it bounced back a few minutes later.

“Maybe she’s dead, too,” Tyler said.

“Or doesn’t use email anymore, like almost everyone else.”

They were back in the bungalow, drinking lemon balm tea in the kitchen.

“It won’t be easy to find her, with only her first name,” Tyler said.

“We need to unlock your aunt’s phone, see if it has Luisa’s number. The person who’s helping me look for soul chip collectors might be able to help with that.”

“Do you still think Annie had anything to do with the burglary?”

“She likes to talk, doesn’t she? She might have told somebody that you got the setup running again, they might have told someone else . . .”

“But since I didn’t tell her about firing it up, I don’t think it’s likely,” Tyler said, instinctively defending his aunt’s old friend.

“Is the setup connected to the internet?”

Tyler shrugged.

“Go switch it on,” Rose told him, but after everything was up and running, there was no trace of a new connection on the bungalow’s node.

“I should get the server checked out anyway,” Rose said. “In case your burglar installed some kind of spyware.”

“I should have thought of that,” Tyler said.

They were standing in the muffled shadows of the séance room, flecks of light chasing around overhead.

“If you’re going to catch a thief, you have to be able to think like a thief,” Rose said.

"And you're one of the nice guys."

"Gullible, you mean."

"How about honest and straightforward."

"And what does that make you?"

"I admit that I've knocked around with some people on the shady side."

Tyler smiled. "And you're also a well-known plant rustler."

"Caught dead to rights. But do you still trust me?"

"I'm not going to throw you out, if that's what you mean," Tyler said.

\* \* \*

Rose slept on the sofa in the living room, woke early the next morning while Tyler was still asleep, and scribbled a note on the whiteboard fixed to the fridge door and borrowed his bicycle and returned to the Reach. The oldsters were early risers, sitting out on porches or decks, practicing glacial Tai Chi moves on a patch of threadbare grass, pedalling away on the fixed bicycles, pumping their daily share of electricity into the communal batteries, but no one challenged Rose when she swooshed by and climbed aboard Joshua's barge. He was sitting up in bed and Kayla was perched on a stool beside him, feeding him porridge laced with honey. The two of them caught in a dusty beam of sunlight slanting through one of the brass-rimmed portholes like saints in an old-time religious painting.

Kayla was cool, but not unfriendly. Maybe because Rose made it clear that she wasn't planning to stay, she was just stopping by to see how her old friend was. Maybe because Joshua was so obviously pleased to see her, and would take her side in any dispute. Rose thanked him for helping out with her trouble with the warden, and he said that the coffee was a generous gift for what amounted to nothing at all, and told her they'd soon be gleaning together again.

"I'm on the mend, as you see," he said cheerfully. "I'll be up and about in no time."

"But not quite yet," Kayla said.

"You're not the boss of me, woman," Joshua said, and winked at Rose.

"Let's see what the doctor has to say," Kayla told him.

"Fresh air and sunshine—that's all I need now."

"Just give me a call when you're ready to go out again," Rose said, looking at Kayla, who looked right back at her.

Joshua smiled his crooked smile and said, "Speaking of trouble, I hear you've moved out."

"You know I wasn't going to stay here for ever. And I haven't gone far," Rose said, still looking at Kayla. "Just up to the village."

Joshua was pleased by that. "Would that have anything to do with Tyler Sleight? Is this still a mystery story, or has it changed gears and become a romance?"

"It isn't much of anything at the moment," Rose said. She wanted to tell Joshua about the latest twists in the soul chip business, but not while Kayla was there, the woman speaking up now, saying that the doctor was due soon, and Joshua needed to finish his breakfast.

"I'll stop by again soon," Rose said.

"Or give me a call," Joshua said. "Keep me posted about developments in your mystery slash romance."

Rose promised that she would, and wheeled the bicycle to the shack Farhad Hassan-zhad shared with Abigay Philibert, Farhad telling her that he was sorry to hear about her troubles.

"It doesn't really mean anything," he said, "but I would have voted for you to stay. I know Joshua likes having you around."

Rose, unexpectedly touched by this, thanked him and asked how the search was going.



“I see that you haven’t moved on completely,” Farhad said. He was sitting cross-legged on a beanbag, dressed in utility shorts and an oversized T-shirt.

“The thief came back and took another chip. Tyler left it in the setup after he gave me a demo. We need to find out who’s in the market for them, so we can sell the rest of the stash.”

“And your work here will be done.”

“Done and dusted. So what do you have for me?”

“Not a lot. Just the one hit, in fact, from all of twelve years ago. Someone calling themselves Grave’s End, not the town, two words, one apostrophe, looking for ‘imprinted or so-called soul chips,’” Farhad said, making quote marks in the air with his forefingers.

“Imprinted as in loaded with a simulation of someone.”

“I assume so.”

“Do you have any idea who this Grave’s End, two words, so on, is?”

“Anonymity is rather the point of the dark web. It may be one person, or a gang or crew, or even a dog.”

“A dog?”

“Old internet joke.”

“Anyone make this Grave’s End an offer?”

“Not as far as I know. There was a public encryption key to initiate a private discussion, but it 404’d. Page not found. A dead end.”

“But someone was definitely looking to buy soul chips. That’s something.”

Rose was thinking of Nicole Featherstone, who’d still been alive, still had been speaking to the dead, when that want list had been posted. Perhaps she’d replied. Sold some chips to the person who called themselves Grave’s End, they’d wanted more, found out that she’d died, and come a-hunting. Or perhaps Nicole had been Grave’s End, searching for chips to add to her collection. But now she was dead, and there was no one who could speak to her shade.

“A very little something, I’m afraid,” Farhad said. “I have a crawler looking for similar links, but so far it hasn’t turned up anything.”

“I have another favor to ask,” Rose said, and produced Nicole Featherstone’s phone and explained that she needed to unlock it because she wanted to get in touch with Nicole’s old friends, especially anyone she worked with when she was working for Athanasia, the company which made the soul chips.

“I’m not in the unlocking business, but I know someone who can help with that,” Farhad said. “Have you tried to find out anything about her old workplace?”

“I looked, but I didn’t find anything useful.”

“Perhaps you were looking in the wrong place,” Farhad said.

He opened the clamshell of an ancient computer and bent over it, his long beard brushing the keyboard as he typed, telling Rose that back in the day, when everything was connected to everything else, there had been commercial search engines that would do this kind of work in the twinkling of an eye.

“They were free to use, and earned money from advertisers who paid to get their ads in front of the eyeballs of users. And that was where the trouble began. Companies gamed the search ranking system to push links to their ads, criminals promoted booby-trapped web pages—links to scams, viruses that would infect users’ computers, and so on. Commercial search engines became increasingly compromised by this poison fruit, real information was driven out by bad, and the internet fragmented as parts of it were walled off from the rest.”

Farhad might have said more—like all the other oldsters he liked to explain how everything had gone so badly wrong and how his generation had tried to fix it—but his computer played a brief chiming melody, and he rattled the keyboard and turned

the machine so Rose could see its screen.

"The web site of Athanasia from twenty-one years ago," he told her. "Patched together and stored by the Time Machine—one of the projects built by volunteers to cache and curate material that might have otherwise been lost. It's no longer active, but its archives are still accessible, if you know where to look. This is the page with a list of Athanasia's employees."

Thumbnail photos and brief biographies scrolled down. There was the young version of Nicole Featherstone, and just above her the image of a black-haired woman, Luisa Montera.

"Can you find out if Luisa Montera is still alive?" Rose said. "And if she is, where she lives?"

"Is this is going to end up causing trouble that might attract the attention of the authorities?"

"It's just a private thing. I give my word."

Farhad studied her for a moment, grave and intent. "How good is your word?"

"I hope as good as any other person's."

"That will have to do, I suppose," Farhad said, and started typing again. "This is an interesting role reversal. Or perhaps you and I embody an older trope. The wise wizard scrying with his magic crystal or his enchanted mirror, helping the young hero with her quest."

"You've spent too much time hanging out with Joshua," Rose said. "He thinks everything is some kind of story."

"Perhaps it is our way of trying to make sense of this future we find ourselves in," Farhad said. "Luisa Montera is still alive, by the way."

"You've found her."

"I've found someone with that name who is about the right age, but I do not know if this is the one you are looking for."

A beat, in which Rose realized he'd made a reference to some long-dead cultural thing she was supposed to recognize. She said, "Where is she? How can I contact her?"

Farhad gave an address in London. "The Reconstruction, to be precise."

"Do you have her phone number?"

"I looked her up in the electoral register, and that's as far as I'm prepared to take it. I have issues, serious issues, about compromising someone's privacy. You have all you need to find her. The rest is up to you."

Rose decided not to press the point, and said, "There's just one more thing."

She'd brought the server from the séance setup, strapped to the bicycle's cargo rack and wrapped in a paint-flecked bedsheet. Farhad popped open its casing, told Rose that he couldn't see any physical spyware, a pinhole camera or a Wi-Fi chip, so forth, but he'd boot it up and check its software. It might take a little while, he said, and she told him it wasn't a problem, she had plenty of other things to do, starting with getting Nicole Featherstone's phone unlocked.

\* \* \*

When Farhad called to tell her what he'd found, late in the afternoon, Rose was on the bus with Tyler, heading toward Gravesend.

"Did you get most of that?" she asked Tyler, after the call had ended.

"Something about viral code in the server."

"Inside the bootup instructions. It records every operation of the soul chip, and uses a link to the local network to send the recordings somewhere else. Which is how the thief knew you had replaced the stolen chip and used the setup again."

Tyler thought about that. "Does your friend know where those recordings were sent? Like a physical address?"

“That would make things easy, wouldn’t it?” Rose said. “But the server’s Wi-Fi has a limited range, according to Farhad. Just a hundred meters or so. He thinks that the receiver was hidden nearby. A phone maybe, or a memory stick attached to a Wi-Fi chipset.”

“We can look for it when we get back,” Tyler said.

“We can. But it’s likely to be small, it could be in the house, the garden, the street. . . . It might not be easy to find, and I have a better idea,” Rose said, and as the bus glided through the outskirts of Gravesend she explained the little action she’d cooked up.

The shop Farhad had recommended was close to the sweep of the new waterfront, built ten years ago over the flooded remains of a patchwork of industry and early twenty-first century housing estates. A narrow yellow-brick shed, no shop sign or window, an old woman perched on a stool behind the tiny counter, framed by a hard-board fascia hung with tools, cluttered shelving units receded into the dim interior. She took the phone and rose in stages and disappeared into the back of the shop, where some kind of red-eyed phantom lurked in the shadows—no, after a few seconds’ confusion, Rose realized that the eyes were pinlights in a slab of electronics, and took some deep breaths to calm her racing heart. If Tyler noticed that she’d been triggered, he didn’t mention it. A couple of minutes later, the old woman emerged from the crepuscular interior, carefully resumed her perch on the stool, set the phone on the counter and told them that she’d disabled the phone’s retinal scan and reset the passcode to 1111, and began to laboriously tally the charge on an ancient calculator.

“There’s something else we need,” Rose said. “Do you happen to have any motion-sensitive cameras? And also one of those universal tracker tabs.”

\* \* \*

After they boarded the ferry to London, Rose and Tyler scrolled through the functions of Nicole’s phone for a second time, checking stuff they’d found while waiting for the ferry to arrive, looking for anything they might have missed. Luisa Montera’s phone number and street address, the same address Farhad had given to Rose, were in the contact list, but the phone number was an old one that had been reassigned to someone who had never heard of Luisa. There was a strong possibility that the street address might be out of date, too, and they hadn’t found any texts or messages from the woman, or from any other former workmates either. Luisa Montera hadn’t visited Nicole for many years, according to Annie Truit, and hadn’t attended the funeral. The two women might have had a falling out, or might have simply drifted apart, as people do, and Nicole hadn’t bothered to delete her details.

“Even if we find her, she might not remember anything useful,” Tyler said. “The company shut down a long time ago.”

“Only one way to find out,” Rose said, trying to sound more positive than she felt. “And if it doesn’t work out, there’s always Plan B.”

“I’m not too sure,” Tyler said, “about your Plan B.”

“It is a bit of a Hail Mary,” Rose admitted. “If I think of anything better, you’ll be the first to know.”

As the ferry cruised upriver, they rehearsed what they wanted to ask Luisa Montera, and speculated about the identity and motivation of the person who had inserted the viral code into the server, trying to outdo each other’s lurid scenarios. A criminal conspiracy using a network of soul chips for some kind of nefarious enterprise, like a plantation owner overseeing an army of slaves. An illegal form of entertainment for the jaded rich—ghost rides or spook houses with actual dead people. Perverted collectors. Or maybe someone who saw themselves as a champion of the dead, tracking down soul chips and returning them to their owners, or relatives of deceased owners. Rose knew that the truth would most likely turn out to be crushingly

mundane, might not give her even the slightest chance to make some credit, but she and Tyler were having fun, caught up in their adventure and with each other. Righteous conspirators searching for clues that would unlock a gnarly mystery. Hunters on the trail of the thief of dead souls.

The ferry passed through the New Thames Barrier, with its huge shell gates and bulwarks, built after the great flood when a tidal surge and hurricane-force winds had pushed the sea to dangerous levels along the east coast, overwhelming the old barrier and spilling into the river behind it, already swollen by weeks of constant rain. Supposedly, the new barrier was good for another century, but sea levels were still rising and storms were growing in strength and frequency, so who knew?

It was dusk now, the running lights of streams of drones braiding the darkening air above the new docks, clusters of jacked-up warehouses and tower farms, and old riverside apartment buildings that had survived the flood and stood now inside levees and coffer dams. At the Greenwich terminal, Rose stuck close to Tyler as he moved with unflappable self-assurance through streams of commuters, buying tickets for a waterbus that took them around a bend in the river to the archipelago of the Reconstruction, which had been the southern end of the Isle of Dogs before the river had been allowed to reclaim it as part of the new flood defense measures. The waterbus chugged past New Marsh Wall, a section of the formidable barrier that protected Canary Wharf, home of the government and transnational agencies that ran the carbon balance economy, and took a winding route through canals and lagoons. Rose and Tyler disembarked at one of its last stops, a skinny island crowded with apartment buildings at the southern edge of the Reconstruction. Luisa Montero's address was easy to find, a waterside block overlooking a small marina, but there was no reply when Rose used her phone to look up and buzz the woman's apartment, and with no better idea she and Tyler snagged a table outside a nearby café so they could watch the building's entrance.

The Reconstruction reminded Rose of Bristol's harbor, her favorite part of her home city, but everything was newer and cleaner, gleaming with casual affluence. People strolling and cycling along the waterside greenway, apartment buildings lifting checkerboards of windowlights into the hot dark air, trees strung with thousands of little lights that changed color in waves of pink and purple and yellow, boats lit up like spaceships plying silky black water between the glittering galaxies of islands. . . . She told Tyler that it seemed like a sci-fi fairyland, and he said, with a touch of atypical cynicism, that it was a kind of showcase, all glitzed up and very deliberately situated next to Canary Wharf, so visiting diplomats and bankers could see how London was adapting to the new normal.

"But there are tens of thousands of displaced persons living in camps not far away, and old council estates and streets and streets of rotten old houses no one can afford to upgrade or replace. Like where I was living before all this blew up, a rented room in a terraced house built more than a hundred years ago. That's the real London, shabby and overcrowded and barely getting by."

"And you want to move back, instead of staying on in the lovely house you inherited," Rose said.

"London's everything I said it is, but it's full of life, too. And my friends are here, and my career, such as it is."

"At this point in my life any kind of home would be good," Rose said. "Maybe it's time to try living on the regular. Settle down, find a real job. . . ."

"Save enough to go to the Czech Republic, get your head straightened out."

"That's not the only reason I'm doing this. Not even the main reason, anymore."

"You're having fun, playing at detective or secret agent, or whatever this is about."

"Aren't you?"

“I suppose it would be nice to know who keeps breaking into my aunt’s place,” Tyler said, with a touch of his maddening go-along-to-get-along ambivalence. “I was thinking, if this investigation, or whatever it is we’re doing here, if it doesn’t work out, maybe I should just give the chips to you.”

“That’s sweet,” Rose said. She was touched by the sentiment of the gesture, but was chary, too. Although she liked Tyler, she didn’t want to be beholden to him. “Trouble is,” she said, “there doesn’t seem to be much of a market for them. And if this thief does turn out to be some kind of creep, even I might not want to sell them to him.”

An hour passed, mostly in silence. Tyler disappearing into his head, Rose watching the lights and the ridiculously well-groomed, well-heeled passers-by. Farhad had flashed a copy of Athanasia’s web site to her phone. She had the page of employees open, centered on Luisa Montera’s photo, and she was wondering what she would do if they couldn’t find the woman or she didn’t want to talk, was thinking about Plan B. It was a last resort, desperate and chancy, but if it was the only chance left she’d mash all the buttons. Joshua had told her that this was a kind of caper, Tyler had said that she was having fun, playing detective, and the pursuit of the chip thief had given shape and purpose to her life. But she’d started out with a dream of cashing in the chips for a ticket to the clinic in the Czech Republic, and if things worked out, if she could persuade Tyler to sell the chips, she might be a step closer to that. To dispersing her ghosts and vindicating poor Ollie’s fantasy. She wasn’t about to give up on it just yet, and felt a little kick of relief and triumph when at last she spotted Luisa Montera.

The woman was older than her photo, of course, her square mannish face creased and lined, snow-white hair cut in asymmetric layers, but it was definitely her, walking hand-in-hand with a little girl of seven or eight. Rose and Tyler caught up with them at the entrance to the apartment building, Luisa turning when Rose called her name, the young girl studying the two strangers solemnly as Tyler explained about his aunt and the theft of several of the soul chips she’d used in séances.

Luisa Montera showed no reaction to the news of Nicole’s death, said that she’d lost touch years ago, but would do her best to answer their questions. “First, though, I must take Hadiya home. I’ll find you in the café in a few minutes.”

A few minutes stretched into half an hour. Rose was beginning to freak out a little, worrying that the woman might have called the cops, trying to ignore Grey Guy playing peek-a-boo amongst the passers-by, and felt a pathetic wave of gratitude when at last Luisa Montera walked up. She’d put on lipstick, touches of rouge at the points of her cheekbones. She allowed Tyler to buy her a glass of wine, explained that Hadiya’s father had been a little late coming home from work, which was why she’d had to keep them waiting. She was a part-time babysitter, she said. It didn’t pay much, but she liked kids and it supplemented her pension, let her buy a few luxuries now and then.

The waitress set the glass of white wine in front of her, and she took a sip and smiled at Tyler and Rose and said briskly, “Well, how do you think I can help you?”

Tyler looked at Rose and Rose plunged straight in, saying, “How long did you and Nicole work together?”

“Six years. No, almost seven. I took Nicole’s old job when she became company secretary, but she sometimes helped me out. It was a small company. Charlie East, our boss, liked to keep things informal. And Nicole was good with people. Put them at their ease. Got them talking.”

“She told me that she interviewed clients,” Tyler said. “Got them to tell their life stories.”

“What they chose to tell us, how they answered our questions, their responses to

tests and assessments, all of that went into the databases used by the chips' AIs. Looking back, of course, it was all nonsense," Luisa said. "You can't capture anyone's personality by a few days of interviews and tests. One of the things we did, if you can believe it, was make them watch films while wearing an MRI cap and a blood pressure cuff, to capture their reactions."

"What kind of films?" Tyler said.

"Old classics. Your aunt called them grand weepers. There was one about a young boy and some sort of alien creature. Another about a family and their dog—the dog died, which was supposed to be some kind of life lesson," Luisa said, with a little grimace that implied she thought it had been no such thing. "The clients chose which one they wanted to watch, their brain activity and eye movements and blood pressure and so on were monitored, and their reactions added to the database. It was not in any way scientific, but the clients did not seem to mind. They were generally people with a strong sense of self-worth and a large amount of vanity. Successful people, entrepreneurs, business people, and so on. They liked the attention, the ritual of the process. We usually had to go to their offices or homes for the interviews—they were too important, or thought they were, to come to us, in Gravesend. And if they were especially important, which is to say especially rich, Charlie East would do the honors. Flying off to Paris or Milan or wherever. Five-star junkets that were not for mere employees like me, or even Nicole. The point was, it was as much about flattering the clients' feelings of self-worth as it was about capturing their personalities. We were selling what I suppose you'd call a dream. Or a conceit, a display of status. Nicole was especially good at the flattery. Perhaps that's how she got into the psychic business."

"We were wondering," Rose said, "how she got hold of the chips she used in her séances."

"I'm afraid that I can't help you with that," Luisa said. "I knew about her new direction, but to be frank I thought it was silly and exploitative. I didn't know it involved the chips until you told me."

"But you stayed in touch with her," Tyler said.

"While I was still living in Gravesend, scraping by as a teaching assistant. Then my daughter finished school and I found a better job, private secretary to the CEO of an equity firm that underwrote carbon capture and storage, and I moved here."

Rose said, "Did anyone ever approach you, try to buy soul chips from you?"

Luisa shook her head and said firmly, "Never."

"Not even when the company went bankrupt?"

"When it happened, it happened very quickly. The company was already over-extended when one of the rockets that carried the chips into orbit exploded. Insurance didn't cover all the losses, and the sky crash happened a year later, and that was the end of the core business. We limped on for a couple of years, selling customized AI agents and what Charlie called interactive remembrances, but then the economy went to pieces along with everything else, and the company's creditors pulled the plug. One day I was interviewing a client; the next, first thing in the morning, I was notified by text that I was out of a job. I didn't even bother to go in to clear my desk. It was Nicole who collected my stuff." Luisa paused, then said, "I suppose that's when she might have taken the chips. But if she did, she never said anything about it to me."

"She had a setup that manifested what I suppose you could call the ghosts stored on those chips," Rose said. "Could she have built something like that?"

"I don't know. Neither of us were involved in the technical side of things. The imprinting process and so on."

"You mean making the chips," Rose said.

"They were supplied by a company in Korea, pre-loaded with generic AIs. Imprinting was the term we used in the company for uploading a client's database onto a

chip and training the AI how to use it.”

“Can you remember the names of the people who did that work? The imprinting and so on.”

“Do you think one of them has something to do with the thefts you told me about?” Luisa said.

“Declan Morrison—he was the chief technical officer, wasn’t he?” Rose said. “Did he have anything to do with the imprinting process?”

Luisa and Tyler were both looking at her.

“I found the company’s web site,” she said. “There was a list of people who worked there.”

“I haven’t thought about Declan in years,” Luisa said.

“You didn’t keep in touch with him, or anyone else.”

“Only with Nicole, and that lapsed when I moved to London.”

Rose asked Luisa if she knew anything about Grave’s End. “Not the town, but perhaps some kind of company or organization. Two words, one apostrophe.”

It was a wild shot, but Luisa surprised her, explaining that it was the original name of the company.

“The money people had Charlie East change it because of the morbid associations. Charlie tried to persuade them that it was a clever wordplay, that it was about the end of death and a reference to his birthplace, but they weren’t having it, so he dug around in the thesaurus and came up with Athanasia. It means ‘everlasting life.’”

Rose said, “But it was called Grave’s End to begin with.”

“When it was a start-up. Charlie, Nicole, and Declan in a room over a shop on New Road.”

The interview had wound down. Rose had one more question.

“Where can we find your old boss?”

“Poor Charlie, he died years ago,” Luisa said. “He put everything into the company, and when it went under it broke his heart.”

\* \* \*

After they’d thanked Luisa, after she’d left, Rose and Tyler moved on to a bar and talked about their next move. Rose said that she had a pretty good idea who Grave’s End might be. “I wondered if it might have been Athanasia’s boss, but since he’s dead, I think the next best contender is this chief technical officer, Declan Morrison.”

“Who you didn’t mention until just now,” Tyler said.

The two of them were sitting face to face across a little table in a quiet corner of the bar, Rose with a glass of peach iced tea, Tyler a pint of stout the color of blood.

“He was on the list of employees on Athanasia’s web site,” Rose said. “Which you saw when I showed you that photo of Luisa Montera. She said something about the chips being imprinted, it was what people in the company called the process. And that’s what someone who called themselves Grave’s End was looking for—imprinted soul chips. Luisa also told us that Grave’s End was what Athanasia was called before it was called Athanasia, so I figure it has to be someone from the company. And of all the people on that short list of employees, wouldn’t the chief technical officer be the person most likely to have a use for the chips?”

“Even so, it seems like a stretch,” Tyler said. “And as far as I remember, Nicole never mentioned this guy.”

“If the two of them conspired to steal chips from the company after it went bankrupt, she had good reason not to mention him,” Rose said. “And if, as chief technical officer, Declan Morrison helped to develop them, it’s possible that he built that ghost projection system of hers, too. If he did, and if he’s also the thief, it would have been easy for him to slip in that spy code.”

Tyler sipped his stout, considering this. He said, “I still think it’s a stretch.”

"If Declan Morrison isn't Grave's End, he might be our best chance of finding out who is."

"So now we have to find him."

"The way we found Luisa. And if we don't have any luck, there's still Plan B."

Tyler smiled. "Whatever happens next, I think we did some good detective work today."

"We don't know everything yet," Rose said, "but I think we're getting somewhere."

Tyler ordered another round of drinks, and bowls of fried crickets and roasted cauliflower and artichoke dip. By the time they left the bar, they'd missed the last ferry to Gravesend, and ended up in a cheap hotel near the ferry terminal. On the pallet bed, in the reflected glow of streetlights on the ceiling, Rose and Tyler made slow cautious love, Tyler pausing at each stage to ask for the usual permissions, asking afterward how she was. Rose said fine, and because it sounded weak she rolled onto her side and kissed him and qualified it. "Really fine."

It had been okay, but not earthshaking or life-changing. And not much like the cheerful romps with Derry Dave, either. Tender but cautious. A relief, really, to get it over with, but now there was the question of whether Tyler thought this was just a casual thing, or the beginning of something more serious.

He didn't volunteer anything, and Rose didn't ask. Wide-awake while he slept beside her, trying to ignore the shadows up in a corner of the ceiling where something seemed to cling, she thought about what they needed to do next and wondered what would happen after they solved the mystery of the chips, or if they gave up on it. Tyler was easy on the eye, cheerful, patient, and sympathetic, but was that enough for her to make some kind of commitment and settle down? Maybe he'd share some of the credit from the sale of the bungalow, help her get treatment at the clinic, but how would she feel about that, afterward?

She got up early next morning, showered in the bathroom down the corridor, the full two minutes allotted by the meter, and dressed in yesterday's clothes and bought tea and sweet rolls from a hole-in-the-wall place near the hotel and brought them back to the room. Tyler behaved as if nothing special had happened the night before; if anything, he was a little embarrassed. Maybe he didn't know what it had meant either, which was fine as far as Rose was concerned. They drank the tea and ate the rolls and went over their plan again, such as it was, and caught the ferry back to Gravesend.

Rose called Farhad and asked for one more favor; he told her that she could easily look up what she needed to know and sent a pointer to council records, and within five minutes she'd found Declan Morrison's address and pulled it up on a map. She called Joshua, too, to see how he was and tell him what she was up to.

"The doctor paid a visit yesterday," he said. "Told me that I'm good to go, which disappointed Kayla somewhat. She means well, but likes to dragoon invalids in her care. But I'm invalid no longer, and if you want to come along, I'll be out in the marsh tomorrow."

"I persuaded Tyler to let me help him find the soul-chip thief," Rose said, and told him about the meeting with Luisa Montera. "Now we're going to look for someone else who worked with Nicole Featherstone back in the day. Declan Morrison. A very technical guy who might have helped her set up the ghost gear."

"And how are things between you and your young man?"

"He isn't mine," Rose said.

She was standing at the stern rail, warm air gusting around her, river water churned to a white wake below. Looking across the thinly populated rows of benches on the ferry's rear deck to where Tyler was sitting, one arm on the back of the bench, legs stretched out straight, face turned up to the morning sunlight, hair shining like



spun gold.

"I was hoping to hear some salacious details about the romantic thread of this story," Joshua said.

"There's nothing to tell," Rose lied. The old man meant well, but what had happened last night was none of his business.

"That's just what you would say, if there was," Joshua said.

Tyler had noticed that Rose was looking at him, and smiled and gave her a little wave.

"It's also what I'd say if there wasn't," Rose told Joshua, feeling a little heat in her face. "And don't be such a dirty old man."

"I may be old, and a man, but I'm always open to learning something new about current customs. So, this Declan Morrison. What do you hope to learn from him?"

"I'm going to ask him straight out if he's still looking to buy soul chips. If he is, and if Tyler agrees to it, we'll tell him we have some for sale."

"And if he isn't your burglar?"

"Maybe he can tell us who is. And if he can't or won't, I have one more idea," Rose said. "It's a longshot, and if it doesn't work out, that's probably that."

"You're at the low point in the story," Joshua said. "Where everything seems hopeless, you're floundering around, grasping at straws. But then it all changes, and comes good."

"In stories, yes. Not so much in real life. But I admit that I thought it would be easier."

"The romance part or the mystery part?"

"Why are you so eager for me and Tyler to get together?"

"Perhaps because I think you deserve to find happiness. If I were forty years younger . . ."

"Sixty might do it," Rose said.

"I know you love being in the marsh. Come out with me tomorrow. Forget your troubles for a while."

"You only want me for my picking skills."

"If you like, I can make a case for allowing you back, despite your brush with the law."

"I appreciate the offer. I really do. But it really might be time for me to move on."

"Let's see how you feel after some fresh air and honest work."

"Let's see how the visit with Declan Morrison pans out first," Rose said.

The address she'd found in the council records was in a street of modest terraced houses not far from the town center. It was Saturday, kids playing in the road and people sitting out on doorsteps or folding chairs in the growing heat. On the strip of hard standing in front of Declan Morrison's house, an old man with a henna-dyed beard, bare-chested in shorts and sandals, was squatting beside an upturned bicycle, adjusting the front derailleur. He told Rose and Tyler that, yes, this was Mr. Morrison's house, but Mr. Morrison had moved out some years ago, and let rooms through the council's displaced persons' scheme.

"Would you happen to have his address, or his phone number?" Rose said.

"Everything is done through the council. If something needs fixing, we tell the council, and they tell Mr. Morrison, and he sends someone to fix it, or comes here himself. He knows all about electrics."

"How do you pay rent?" Rose said, wondering if they could track down Declan Morrison through his bank account.

"I pay rent to the council, and they pay him. There are six of us living here, but it is very much better than the flat in Christian Fields, the council estate, where I was living before." The old man studied Rose and Tyler, then said, "You have not told me

why you looking for Mr. Morrison. Is he in trouble?"

"Mr. Morrison used to work with Tyler's aunt," Rose said. "Has he ever said anything about their company, Athanasia? Or mentioned soul chips?"

"I don't think so," the old man said. "He doesn't say much, Mr. Morrison."

"How would you describe him?" Tyler said.

The old man gave that some thought. "I would say private."

"Like someone who has secrets?" Rose said.

The old man's smile showed a sizeable gap between his front teeth. "Like someone who keeps his business to himself?"

Rose called the council again, but was told that it didn't give out the addresses of property owners who participated in the displaced persons' scheme. Personal data and privacy issues, no exceptions.

So much for her lead. She had reached a low point, all right.

"Looks like we only have one option left," she told Tyler.

"Or maybe this is a sign that we should leave it be," he said.

"Just give up?"

"Well," Tyler said, with a shoulder-shrug, "we tried our best, but we're no closer to finding this thief."

There it was, one of the reasons why Rose was ambivalent about their relationship, such as it was. Tyler was a nice guy, but not exactly the smartest wrench in the toolbox and far too laid back for her liking, seriously lacking in resolve and commitment.

"Maybe things haven't panned out the way we hoped," she said, trying to be patient, "but we've done some good work. You said so yourself. We may not have proof of the chip thief's identity, or know why they want the chips so badly, but it's likely they used to work for Athanasia, and I still have a good feeling about this Declan Morrison character. We haven't found him yet, but he's been visiting that house he rents out, so wherever he's living now is probably somewhere in or around Gravesend. We can do some more digging, try to find out where he lays his head at night, or we can try something else. Fire up the ghost gear and see if that lures him out, like we discussed."

Watching Tyler ruminant about that, thinking that this was how it would be if they stayed together, pushing back against his passivity, steering him away from the easy option, persuading him that doing something was always better than doing nothing.

"You want to go with Plan B," he said.

"It can't hurt to give it a shot," Rose said. "And if no one takes the bait, it'll be a sign that we've reached the end of the road. You can say I told you so, and do what you want with the rest of the chips. Throw them into the deepest pool in the marsh, for all I care. So how about it?"

\* \* \*

It didn't take long to place the motion-sensitive cameras they'd purchased from the little shop above the bungalow's front and back doors and inside the séance room. Rose pried open the casing of a soul chip, inserted a geo tag and synched it to their phones, and sat in the kitchen while he activated the setup and, hopefully, sent a signal to the thief via the embedded spyware. After a brief muffled conversation, he came in and told her that this time the ghost was a man. An old guy name of Freddie Villiers.

"What were you two talking about?"

"Football, mostly. He supported Liverpool, which is where he's from. Or was from. Where he made his money—developing the new port," Tyler said, ruffling his hair. "It was weird, switching him off."

“He isn’t a person. He’s an AI running a simulation off a database.”

“I know, but it was still weird. This old guy in an old-fashioned suit, sort of see-through, feet not quite touching the ground. Telling me it was fine, he had other business, when I apologized for having to do it.”

“You’ve done your bit,” Rose said. “Leave the rest to me.”

She took the night watch, camping out on the sofa in the living room. Partly because she felt it was her duty, this being her idea, partly to avoid the awkwardness of going to bed with Tyler again. That she felt it was awkward sort of summed up her feelings. She didn’t regret the night in the hotel, but didn’t especially want a rematch.

She fell asleep, woke with a start when her phone vibrated, her heart quickening in sympathy. But when she studied the blurry, color-leached images relayed by the cameras’ low-rez night vision, she saw that the intruder was a fox passing through the garden, pausing and looking directly at the camera over the back door, as if aware, through some kind of supernatural sensitivity, that it was being watched, before trotting on.

“That was the only intruder,” Rose told Tyler the next morning. “But at least we know the cameras work. I’ll have plenty of warning if the thief pitches up.”

“Are you sure you’ll be okay, waiting here on your own?”

“It’ll be just like the army, long stretches of nothing at all punctuated by moments of sheer terror,” Rose said, and had to explain that it was an old joke. “Enjoy your break, and don’t worry about me.”

Tyler had arranged to stay in Gravesend with one of his cousins while she staked out the bungalow until either the thief made their move or Plan B’s deadline, three days and three nights, expired. After Tyler left, she walked through the bungalow’s rooms, enjoying being alone for the first time in a long while, trying to imagine Nicole Featherstone living here on her own, in all this space. She checked the cameras, did a full set of core strength exercises on the living room’s dusty carpet, practiced her breathing exercises, ruffled through some of Nicole Featherstone’s books on spirituality and life after death. Wondering if Nicole had ever really believed in it, or if it had just been an act. Maybe she’d comforted her clients, as Annie Truit had claimed, but she’d also earned a good living from them. A good living from death. . . .

Nothing happened, and nothing continued to happen. Lunch was a cold pasta salad and one of the apples, bruised and mealy, she and Tyler had bought yesterday, in Gravesend. The bungalow was spookily quiet; the camera feeds were still lifes of hot sunlight and deep shadow. It was as mindlessly boring as guard duty, except she didn’t have a rifle or a buddy, couldn’t take a break by walking the perimeter.

She called Joshua and explained about Plan B, asked him about his gleaning trip.

“It was good to get out, though I didn’t bother with the market,” Joshua said.

“Because you couldn’t pick enough to make it worthwhile, without me?”

“Because a couple of hours of messing about in my boat was about all I could manage. But I wouldn’t mind it if you came along, next time.”

“When I’m done here, sure. Who was with you today?”

“Farhad. He told me how he’d helped you. Can I tell him how you made use of it?”

“I’ll tell him myself, when this is over. Though there probably won’t be much to tell.”

“I’m sure he could help you find this Declan Morrison, if your Plan B doesn’t flush out the thief.”

“If this doesn’t work, I don’t think Tyler would want to take it any further.”

“What about you?”

“I reckon this is my last best chance, such as it is.”

“Sounds like you’re getting ready to move on.”

“Sorry to disappoint.”

"You don't have to prove anything to me, Rose," Joshua said. "Or to yourself, either."

She checked the cameras again and fell asleep on the sofa, was woken when Tyler called, late in the afternoon, wanting to know if anything had happened.

"I would have told you if it had," Rose said. She was dry-mouthed and had the beginnings of a headache, hoped it didn't mean that her ghosts were about to start playing up. "How are things with your cousin?"

"Noisy, but kind of fun. Kids, you know. Lots of energy, no off switch," Tyler said. "Are you sure you don't want me to come back? Keep you company, back you up if this actually works."

"The idea is to let the thief do their thing," Rose said, stepping on her irritation. She knew that he meant well, but it reminded her of her parents' suffocating anxiety. "All I have to do is wait and watch. If anything happens, you'll be the first to know."

Supper was another shop-bought salad, beans and tomato this time, washed down with lemon balm tea. It grew dark. Nothing moving in the street outside apart from a couple of dogwalkers on their rounds. She couldn't switch on a light because the thief might be watching the bungalow, couldn't futz around with her phone in case the glow of its screen gave her away. Despite her best intentions, she fell asleep again, was startled awake by the phone's buzz. It was half past midnight, and a figure was standing at the front gate, looking up and down the dark street before coming up the path. A slim person in black clothing, face hidden by the bill of their cap as they went around the side of the bungalow and opened the kitchen door Rose had left unlocked. Pausing again, looking all around, and stepping inside, out of sight of the camera.

Rose was standing in the shadowy living room, listening as faint footsteps padded past the door, counting off a full minute before she stepped quietly and carefully into the hallway. She'd meant to let the thief take the chip, that was the whole point of Plan B, but now that it was happening she needed to know. Who the thief was, why they wanted the chips, put an end to it here and now. A glint of light in the séance room, just do it.

The intruder was standing with their back to her, a small flashlight between their teeth as they fiddled with the server, turning quickly when Rose said, "We need to talk."

The flashlight blinded her and the intruder slammed into her, knocking her backward into the heavy curtains that shrouded the walls, twisting away when she tried to catch hold of them. She gave chase, banging through the kitchen and the back door. The Moon was high and close to full; the garden was drowned in cold blue light and deep shadows. Rose saw something moving past the pollarded eucalyptus trees and ran after it, crashing down the slope through sprawling buddleias and brambles. A stand of bamboo poles clattered and swished overhead as she pushed through them, losing sight of her quarry as shadows gained shape and substance and a spectral figure bent toward her. She tried to dodge it, forgetting in the high panic of the chase that it wasn't real, and lost her footing and splashed into a boggy pool. More ghosts flared around her as she struggled to her feet, Old Rags mopping and mowing, the Poison Twins lunging like leashed attack dogs, the Grey Guy looming behind her, ghosts everywhere she looked. Panic surged up her spine and she ran, gabbling her mantra of ghost names, willing them to be gone gone gone, had scrambled halfway up the slope to the bungalow before she remembered, far too late, the thief she'd been chasing.

\* \* \*

By the time Tyler arrived, on an electric bicycle he'd borrowed from his cousin's husband, Rose had showered and changed her clothes and was working on her second mug of lemon balm tea, fortified with enough sugar to stand up the spoon. She ran the recording from the camera over the back door, froze it at the moment when

the intruder had turned to see who was pursuing him.

“There,” she told Tyler, too tired and jangled to feel any triumph. “There’s your thief.”

She had used one of her phone’s apps to sharpen a screenshot. Tyler bent close to study it, said he was far too young to have worked at Athanasia.

“Hired, I’d guess, by the person who wants to get hold of these chips,” Rose said. “Maybe Declan Morrison, maybe someone else.”

They were sitting at the kitchen table. She’d switched on every light in the bungalow and the kitchen window was a black mirror she couldn’t look at, in case something was lurking inside it.

Tyler wanted to know what they should do now. “Can we show this to the police, see if they know who the kid is?”

“It’s up to you, being the householder and all. But I don’t think we should give up just yet,” Rose said, and showed Tyler the brief path of the tracker she’d hidden inside the soul chip. A cluster of red dots as it passed through the village, a couple more on the road toward Gravesend, and a last lone red dot at a junction near the A2 greenway, the major route between London and Dover.

“How these trackers work, they talk to each other and to synched phones and other devices,” Rose said. “An active network where everything in it lets everything close by know where it is. If our boy headed into Gravesend or caught a lift on the A2 there would be a lot more hits. So I think he went east or south. There isn’t much in either direction. A few houses, a couple of farms. Mostly fields and woods. Nothing for the tracker to ping off. We can go check it out tomorrow. Our phones are synched to the tracker, so they’ll let us know if we get close to it.”

“What if this kid went somewhere else?”

“Then you can go to the police, or throw away your stash of chips and forget about the whole thing,” Rose said. “But as far as I’m concerned, we aren’t quite done with Plan B.”

\* \* \*

The place where the tracker had sent its last signal was a roundabout under an elevated section of the A2 greenway. One exit heading toward Gravesend, another feeding an on-ramp to the greenway, and two more for the minor roads that the thief might have taken. Rose sent Tyler east, reckoning it was the least likely choice, passing as it did through a village not too far off, and she went south, cycling along a country lane with unkempt hedges on either side and a mane of dry grass down the center.

It was early in the morning, already hot and steadily growing hotter. Gaps in the hedges gave glimpses of a flat land of huge fields, a glitter of greenhouses, clusters of wind turbines, their huge blades lazily turning in the hot breeze. A smudge of smoke on the horizon where the fires in the Great Buckland reforestation scheme still hadn’t been brought under control.

Rose cycled past a scatter of abandoned bungalows squatting amongst tall dry weeds, and a little further on, as she approached a lone house behind a row of shaggy poplar trees, her phone pinged. She hit the brakes and checked the map, saw a red dot pulsing dead center, enlarged it. Sure enough, the tag was somewhere in or close to that house.

She called Tyler, explained where she was, told him to come quickly as he could. Her plan had worked, but she felt no elation or triumph, just a cool prickling caution, a feeling that she was trespassing on enemy territory. She’d stopped a couple of hundred meters from the house. It stood in a large square plot and from what she could see of it through the poplar trees was built of brick and clapboard, two stories. Its windows were shuttered, the lawn in front had gone to moss and weeds, and someone

was standing in the shadows between two of the trees. Rose flinched, realized it was the Grey Guy and said, "Not now, you fuckers," her voice loud in the hot, still air, and closed her eyes and recited her mantra to still the flutter of incipient panic. When she opened them, the Grey Guy was gone, nothing was stirring around the house, and the tag's signal was still there, strong and unmoving.

She laid her bicycle in the weeds in the road ditch and scouted the perimeter, creeping between rows of tall sorghum plants in the neighboring field, wishing she had binoculars or a drone. A sagging wire fence marked the boundary with the field, sheets were hung on a washing line at the back of the house, and a faint snatch of music wafted to her on the hot breeze, scarcely louder than the soft rustling of the dry seed heads above her head. Someone was at home, but caution overcame curiosity and she decided to hang back and wait for Tyler before making a move.

He turned up sooner than she'd expected, cheerful and sort of glowing, explaining that he'd taken a short cut. Saying, after Rose had shown him the tracker's signal and told him about the music and the washing on the washing line, "So what do we do now?"

"Knock on the door and find out who's at home, of course."

"Is that a good idea? I mean, they're criminals, and this is their home turf."

"What else should we do? Leave a polite note? Just remember that we have something they want, and follow my lead."

They hadn't gone very far, pushing their bicycles up the weedy drive in the shade of the poplars, Rose doing her best to avoid looking at the shadows under the trees, when something dropped out of the air and she gave a stupid little cry and almost dropped her bicycle. The thing was a drone, small and black, fans buzzing and a voice squawking from its little speaker, telling them to turn back, trespassers were not welcome.

"We've come to talk about soul chips," Rose said, and told Tyler to ignore the damn thing when it repeated its warning—it was a civilian model that couldn't do them any harm.

Tall weeds grew on the steps to the front door, it didn't look as if it had been used for a while, so Rose led Tyler around the house to the back, the drone trailing after them, mindlessly repeating its warning. They passed an ancient, wheelless Tesla propped on bricks, its roof and hood scaled with moss and dry leaves. The washing Rose had seen from the field was strung in a zigzag above a stretch of brown grass, sheets hanging stiff and still in the hot motionless air, and a man was standing in front of some kind of greenhouse extension tacked onto the rear of the house, saying loudly, "You're not wanted here, so turn right around and go back the way you came."

Declan Morrison was twenty years older than his photo on Athanasia's website, but Rose recognized him at once: the same shaved head and bushy beard, gone to grey now. He was dressed in shorts and an oversized football jersey, squinting at them with glowering petulance.

"We've come to talk about the soul chips," Rose said again, standing her ground.

"There's nothing to talk about," Declan Morrison said. "And you're trespassing."

"You need the chips, and we have some to sell. Let's talk about that."

"They aren't yours to sell. Nicole stole them."

"Is that why you broke into my friend's house three times? To steal them back?"

"That wasn't me."

"No, it was some kid you paid. The chip he stole last night had a tracker inside it. That's how we found you. We haven't told the police yet, but if you don't want to talk maybe we should."

"We'd like to know why you took them. What you want them for," Tyler said.

"You're the nephew," Declan Morrison said.

"I'm the guy whose house you broke into."

"I'll deal with this, Declan," someone else said. A woman, standing in the doorway of the extension, holding up a hand when Rose started to introduce herself, saying that she knew who they were and why they had come here.

"I'm already dealing with it," Declan Morrison said.

"And look where that got us. Leave this to me, and go check on Elijah. Go on now," the woman said, and stood aside as Declan Morrison barged past her.

"So if you know who we are, I guess I should ask who you are," Tyler said.

"Vanessa East," the woman said. She was pale-skinned and somewhere in her sixties, slim and neat in a white blouse and full-length skirt, studying Rose and Tyler with a kind of brittle calm, telling Tyler, "I knew your aunt. Despite everything, I was sorry to hear that she passed."

"Are you related to Charlie East?" Rose said.

"His widow. Please, come inside, out of the sun."

There was a wicker table and matching wicker chairs inside, surrounded by a small jungle of tropical plants in pebble beds. Orange and lemon trees, arching rafflesias, palms with creepers twining their trunks, bamboo and banana plants. Green light, warm humid air, the sound of water trickling into a pool where large koi carp lurked under lily pads. Vanessa East poured glasses of lemonade from a sweating pitcher after they'd settled at the table, and Rose noted a slight tremor in her hands, reckoned that, despite her apparent self-possession, the woman was at least as nervous as she felt.

"I suppose Luisa Montera told you about us," she said.

"She said that you had been asking questions about the soul chips and Athanasia," Vanessa said. "I asked Declan if he knew anything about you, and that's when I found out what he had been up to."

"Stealing soul chips," Rose said.

"I'm afraid so."

"And you're saying you didn't know anything about it until now?"

"He told me that he had purchased them. It's what we've been doing, over the years. From estate sales, brokers, auction sites. . . . They aren't especially expensive. Worth very little to anyone except the person who commissioned them, but they've become harder and harder to find."

"Why I ask, we met Luisa two days ago, and the chip that led us here was stolen last night."

"Declan and I have issues. He's overly possessive, and has too little respect for my authority and prerogatives. He may have stolen that last chip to prove a point. To me. To you."

"Nicole Featherstone used the chips in her business, but why does Declan want them? Why do you?" Rose said.

A small silence stretched, broken only by the crackle of ice in the untouched glasses of lemonade. Then Vanessa said, "I think it's best if I show you. That's why I invited you in. But first, I want to explain how Nicole was involved, the arrangement she had with my husband, the promise she broke. Or do you already know about that?"

"She never said anything about it to me," Tyler said.

"It was informal, as it had to be," Vanessa said. "Nothing written down. Nicole was the principal officer of the company my husband founded. It had lost its core business and was in serious trouble, and they were doing everything they could to keep it afloat, including some creative accounting. I don't know all the details. Charlie wanted to protect me in case it was found out. And along with everything else, our son, Elijah, was badly wounded while he was in the army."

"I'm sorry to hear that," Rose said.

"She was in the army, too," Tyler said.

"Where did you serve, dear?" Vanessa said.

"Morocco. I was discharged last year," Rose said. Giving Tyler a hard look, daring him to say something, anything, about the psych bomb and her ghosts.

"Elijah was in the Royal Armored Corps," Vanessa said. "Part of a task force helping the UNHCR deliver supplies to refugee camps in southern Ethiopia, at the beginning of the collapse. There was a lot of fighting between the government and various rebel groups, and criminal gangs that had fled the droughts and famines with the rest of the refugees. Elijah was in a truck that was blown up by a roadside bomb. He was in hospital for a long time, and when he was finally allowed to come home, Charlie and Declan came up with a way to help him. They had just about set up everything when the company went under. It had been barely limping along, and the collapse was the last straw. The backers pulled the plug, Charlie was forced to declare bankruptcy, and he died soon afterward. Fell down at the breakfast counter one morning, gone just like that. His heart."

This time it was Tyler's turn to express sympathy.

"Nicole helped Charlie and Declan get hold of the imprinted chips they needed," Vanessa said. "Before the company went under, Declan had been imprinting duplicate chips and Nicole had covered it up by writing it off as simple wastage. And during the bankruptcy proceedings, she saved most of the chips from the asset strippers by adjusting the inventory. Making it seem that stocks were lower than they really were. She gave some to Charlie, and kept some for herself. For her new career as a psychic, a speaker to the dead. I don't mean to judge, but it always seemed to me that she was preying on vulnerable people. Exploiting their grief. Stringing them along with tricks and mumbo-jumbo. And that changed her. Or brought out something that was already there. After Charlie died, she stopped visiting Elijah. Cut us out of her life. And although she had promised that she would give us some of the chips she'd taken for her business, should we ever need them . . . well, she never came through."

"She wasn't exploiting her clients," Tyler said. "She was helping them. And they were loyal to her."

"Is that what she told you?"

"What a good friend of hers said."

"She didn't have very many friends, did she, at the end," Vanessa said, with a sharp look. "Had I gone to her funeral, Tyler, and explained how I knew her and told you about the promise she'd made, we might have been able to come to an arrangement, and avoided all this. But I'm afraid that I still haven't got over her betrayal. Not of me, I know she didn't ever much care for me, but of my son."

"That's why you believe that her soul chips should have come to you when she died," Rose said, before Tyler could chip in again. "But I still don't quite understand why you need them. What all this has to do with your son."

"That's exactly what you need to see for yourselves," Vanessa said. "Why the chips are so important to us, and why Nicole's selfishness put Elijah and his world at risk. Why Declan did what he did, wrongheaded though it was."

She led Rose and Tyler through her greenhouse jungle into the house itself, a large high-ceilinged room that smelled of hot electronics and hospital disinfectant. There were old-fashioned servers racked on one side and steel storage shelves of medical supplies on the other, and music, jagged electric guitars and syncopated drumming, was playing behind green medical privacy screens that curtained off the far end of the room.

Vanessa paused in front of the screens and said, "Only a few people know about this. And my son is still very vulnerable, very dependent. Whatever you choose to do after this, I want you to bear that in mind."



Rose and Tyler exchanged a look, and Rose said she appreciated Vanessa's frankness, and was sympathetic, what with being an army veteran herself. Playing along with the woman's theatrical special pleading, but intrigued, too, wanting to see where it went.

Vanessa pushed one of the screens ajar, gestured. The space beyond was as starkly functional as an operating theatre. A tiled floor and a hospital bed, an oversized shower stall with a hoist sling, a toilet with support rails and a backrest. A sofa wrapped in plastic sheeting. Screens hung over a desk were showing scenes from some kind of movie or video game, and a man, it had to be Elijah, was braced in a motorized wheelchair in front of them. He was bulky and sort of lopsided, wrapped in a brightly striped dressing gown and wearing a kind of crash helmet on his head, its black visor masking his face. The left sleeve of his dressing gown was empty and pinned to his chest, his left leg was fitted with a pseudoflesh prosthetic below the knee, and the thumb and two fingers were missing from his right hand, which rested limp and motionless in his lap.

Declan Morrison was sitting on a high stool in a corner. Looking up from the screen resting in his lap, staring at Rose and Tyler with sulky hostility, telling Vanessa, "This isn't a good idea."

"Neither was breaking and entering," Vanessa said. "How is he?"

"Out and about. The usual. He doesn't have time to meet your friends."

"If you can't bring yourself to be polite to our guests, you can find some other place to be. And switch off the music, so we can hear ourselves think."

"I think I'd better stay," Declan said, the old geezer behaving like a petulant teenager. Stabbing at the screen in his lap, telling Rose and Tyler, as the music cut off, "Elijah likes his desert blues, and so do I. It helps with the transition from his world to ours."

Tyler said, "What kind of world? Where is it?"

"Right there," Declan said, pointing at the screens hung above the desk.

Smaller screens displaying scenes of a perfect, old-time summer's day—antique cars pottering down a country road, a row of shops with awnings shading ornate fronts, a square fort with castellated walls standing at the edge of a river—were tiled around a big central screen that showed a desert landscape, sand and stones saddling away toward stark brown mountain peaks reared against a cloudless blue sky. This view swiveling to and fro and gently oscillating as it progressed at walking pace across stones and ribbons of sand.

"So it's some kind of video game," Tyler said.

"That would be the stupidest way of thinking about it," Declan said.

"Elijah was in a coma for two years," Vanessa said. She was standing behind her son, resting one hand on his shoulder, but he gave no sign that he noticed her. "The doctors said that he was brain-dead, but he wasn't. He was in there all along. He just couldn't communicate with us. But Charlie found a way."

"And it involves soul chips," Rose said.

"There are two kinds of people in Elijah's world," Declan said. "Basic characters running on scripts, with fixed routines and a few stock lines of conversation. And fully realized characters running on integrated chips, with agency and a reasonable imitation of self-aware intelligence."

"We're all characters in Elijah's world," Vanessa said. "Me and Charlie and Declan. Some of Elijah's army friends. The dog he had when he was a little boy. Even Nicole is in there."

"We should have taken her out, but Elijah likes her," Declan said. "The chip version of her, anyway."

"You mean she's some sort of a ghost in there?" Tyler said. The poor guy was having

a hard time keeping up.

"A simulation," Rose said. "Created by a data base and an AI on a soul chip."

"At least one of you gets it," Declan said.

Rose ignored that, asked what Elijah did, in his world.

"He's living his best life," Declan said. "Looking after Grave's End and its people."

"Grave's End as in two words with an apostrophe," Rose said.

"A version of the town on one side of the river, and the desert lair of hostile forces on the other," Vanessa said.

"That's where Elijah is now, on patrol in the desert," Declan said. "The central screen shows his point of view."

"So he's playing at being in the army?" Tyler said.

"Didn't I tell you it's not a game?" Declan said.

"I think you should talk to Elijah," Vanessa said. "Ask him about his world, and what he's doing."

"That isn't a good idea," Declan said.

"I want them to understand why this is essential to Elijah's well-being," Vanessa said.

"How do we talk to him?" Rose said, looking at the man slumped and seemingly oblivious in his wheelchair.

"Use the telephone," Vanessa said, pointing to some kind of antique, like a plastic bone in a cradle, on the desk. "And please, be patient. It can take him a while to frame a reply."

"He uses an eyeball-activated lookup system to communicate," Declan said. "It has tables of stock phrases, but anything else he has to spell out letter by letter."

"You do it," Tyler said to Rose. "You were in the army. I wouldn't know what to ask him."

Rose picked up the telephone's plastic handset. It was linked to its cradle by a curly cable. She knew from old films that you held one end to your ear, spoke into the other, worked out which end was which and heard an electric buzz, as if a cyborg bee was trapped inside.

"Press star," Declan said, with grouchy patience.

It took Rose a moment to realize he meant one of the buttons on the handset. The buzz clicked off, there was a brief ringtone like the one Joshua used in his phone, and a woman's voice said, close and clear, "New Tavern Fort."

Rose looked at Vanessa for guidance.

"Ask for Sergeant East," Vanessa said.

Rose did. "Putting you through now," the voice said, and there was another click, another ringtone.

"Sergeant East," a man's voice said. "How may I help you?"

"I'm Rose," Rose said, not knowing what else to say. She was looking at Elijah again, motionless in his wheelchair.

"Hello, Rose. I see that you are using the hot line. Are you a visitor?"

"I guess I am."

"Did you see the town?"

"It's very pretty. Is that where you live?"

A long pause. Elijah must be using his lookup table to spell out his reply. Rose imagined his gaze moving over a virtual array of letters and words behind the black visor of his helmet. She could hear, faintly over the antique telephone, the same kind of desert blues that had been playing in the sickroom.

"I was born in the town," he said, at last. "And now I look after it."

"It looks like you're on walkabout."

"That's right."

“What’s the gen?”

“Mostly straight hoofing ATM.”

That reply came quickly. Army slang for “everything’s fine.” Rose guessed that he used it a lot.

“No bad guys,” she said.

After a pause: “No bad guys.”

“Are you on your own out there, or do you have an oppo?”

“I have Rupert. He’s my doggo.”

The viewpoint on the screen shifted, and there was a dog, a black Labrador, neatly trotting along.

“Is he a good doggo?” Rose said, touched by the innocent gentleness of this lone warrior.

Another pause. “The best. What can I do for you, Rose?”

“I’m just checking in. Take care, sergeant. Watch your 5s and 20s. Don’t let any Terrys get the jump.”

“No worries on that score. Please enjoy the rest of your visit.”

“I will,” Rose said, and replaced the handset in its cradle.

“Terrys?” Tyler said.

“Army slang. Terrorists and other bad actors,” Rose said.

“So you see,” Vanessa said. Her gaze was starry and her hands were pressed together under her chin.

“I do,” Rose said.

“Can he talk in real life?” Tyler said.

“If he wants to,” Declan said. “Using the lookup system and a vocalizer.”

“Sometimes I push him around the garden,” Vanessa said. “There’s a spot where he likes to sit, watching birds and squirrels. . . . But he spends most of his waking hours in his world. He’s happy there. As close to normal as he ever can be. And now you know why we need the chips. They aren’t worth much to anyone else, but they keep Elijah’s world populated with people he can have proper interactions with.”

“They interact with each other, too. Generate unscripted changes,” Declan said. “To begin with, we collected imprinted chips and jiggled their AIs so they’d accept Elijah’s world as the real thing. Now we overwrite them, make duplicates of existing character sets. Replacements for chips that fail.”

“Charlie skimped quality control, and the chips weren’t designed to be used in the way we’re using them in Elijah’s world,” Vanessa said. “They have a limited life, and an unpredictable failure rate. And the company that made them went out of business not long after Athanasia did.”

“You’re running low,” Rose said.

Declan nodded. Now the talk had moved to technical details, his sarcastic bluster had evaporated. “The databases and decision trees used to generate characters are optimized to work with the AI and hardware embedded in the chips. I’ve built a workaround, a virtual emulation, but there are bridge problems—it’s cranky and prone to crashes, and runs slow. We’ll have to swap over to it eventually, but we want to keep the current setup running for as long as possible.”

“If you have any more chips,” Vanessa said, “I’m not going to plead or beg. But I would like you think hard about what you want to do with them.”

\* \* \*

“It was Tyler’s decision. His chips, his choice,” Rose told Joshua. “And I bet you can guess which way he jumped.”

“How do you feel about that?” Joshua said.

“It was the right thing to do. Of course it was. Although I don’t think it was especially hard for Tyler to give up something he didn’t need or want. And he still has the

bungalow, he's still planning to sell it when he's finished fixing it up. . . ."

"Do I detect a smidjeon of resentment?"

"It's more like disappointment," Rose said. "When I first got into this thing about the soul chips, I thought I might be able to make some credit from it. And when it became clear that was unlikely, I hoped that maybe I'd at least uncover some weird cult or conspiracy. Something significant. But in the end, it was just a mother trying to keep some kind of video game running for the benefit of her disabled son."

"And you were hoping for something more. Something that might have led to a cure for your ghosts, for instance."

"I guess I started thinking it was one of your stupid stories."

"There's certainly some resemblance," Joshua said. "In traditional mysteries, there's often an object that's important to the characters, but has no intrinsic significance. The soul chips are a little like that. They aren't the only thing that could keep Elijah's world running—their caretakers admitted as much. But as far as they're concerned, those chips are much more than their functionality. They're totems. Symbols of a lost past. The time before Athanasia went bankrupt, before Elijah was crippled and his father died. Replacing them with some kind of virtual emulation would be an erasure of that past, an unacceptable alteration to the essence of Elijah's world."

"Why does everything have to be a symbol of everything else?"

"Isn't the world created for Elijah a ghost world, a land of lost content packed with symbols of a better time? Blue remembered hills, happy highways. An obvious metaphor for his memories and sense of place from the time before he was injured. Preserving it from harm, fighting off intruders, is his way of protecting himself from further damage."

"Sounds neat," Rose said. "Meanwhile, in the real world, I have to deal with real problems, like the fine for gleaning without a permit. And since I can't pay it, I'm going to have to stay here a little longer and work it off."

"I would offer to pay it for you," Joshua said. "But I know you'd turn me down."

"You can't get rid of me that easily. And community service doesn't sound too bad."

"Talking of neatness, did you find out who was carrying out the thefts?"

"Not exactly. But Declan Morrison was married, once upon a time. Had a son who'd be about thirty by now. Maybe it was him, maybe not. Tyler doesn't want to take it any further, and I agreed."

"You have turned into quite the detective," Joshua said.

"It was just a hunch, about the son," Rose said. "Farhad did most of the grunt work."

They were sitting in the stern of Joshua's barge, in the shade of a slant of canvas. Low tide, the barge and the houseboats and floating homes of the Reach grounded on their platforms above mudflats that smelt, not unpleasantly, of salt and decay. Joshua now asking Rose, with an impish twinkle, about her relationship with Tyler.

"It's pretty much over," Rose said. "Not that it was much of anything to begin with. Turns out he was more interested in his music than in me, and I was more interested in the mystery of those chips than in him."

After they'd handed the stash of soul chips to Vanessa East, Rose's last night in the bungalow, Tyler had told her, shyly, that he'd finished his first marsh piece, asked her if she wanted to listen to it. She didn't have the heart to refuse, and Tyler had set up the playback in the séance room and absented himself while Rose sat cross-legged on the thick carpet and the brief extract played. The creak and plash of oars, the twitter of birds singing, a piano fading in, echoing the four notes of the loudest song and finding variations, hesitant at first and then gathering force, rippling like running water, and after a couple of minutes fading out, leaving only the sound of

oars, the sound of birdsong, and that too fading, dwindling into silence so slowly it was hard to tell when it was over.

It was very Tyler. Tentative; cautiously, uncertainly finding its way. Afterward, after searching for a word to describe it, Rose had told him that it was ethereal, and he'd seemed pleased by that. Had explained with uncharacteristic, but genuine enthusiasm how he'd been trying to capture what he called the essence of being wholly present in the marsh, and she'd seen that it really mattered to him, in a way that neither she nor the mystery of the chip thief had.

"He said that I could stay on at his place," Rose told Joshua, "but I thought it would be too complicated."

"You're welcome to reclaim your little patch of the roof for as long as you like, or as long as you can stand it."

"Won't Kayla and the others have something to say about that?"

"There'll have to be a discussion, but I think I can convince enough people that you mean no harm. I'll expect payment, of course. Some help with gleanings, nothing you can't handle."

Rose protested, but only a little. She was grateful to be back in the Reach, and it was good to get out in the marsh again, even if Joshua was definitely slower than he'd been, was given to giddy moments of confusion. And soon enough her community service kicked in, eight weeks working to make good fire damage in the Great Buckland reforestation scheme, four more in muddy fields and warm November rain cutting willow whips used in weaving and fence- and coffin-making.

She ran into Tyler in Bartertown a few times, the encounters polite and friendly, Rose thinking if he, like her, wondered what they'd ever seen in each other, and in her last week of work at the willow farm he called her out of the blue. He wanted her to know that he'd sold the bungalow and was moving back to London, told her that she could come visit any time she wanted. She thanked him for the offer but never took it up. Cities weren't for her. Too many people, too much noise, too many places where her ghosts could lurk.

She stayed on at the willow farm for a couple of months after her community service ended, helping to plant new cuttings. By then, she'd moved out of the Reach and was living in a co-op at the edge of Gravesend: a cozy bedroom, shared commons, and a rota of community chores. When the willow-planting work was over, she found a job in the car-recycling yard and signed on at the local army outreach offices for rehabilitation treatment. Talking circles, one-on-one sessions with a therapist. Although she'd never be her old self, was still ambushed every so often by the Grey Guy and the rest of the gang, and still had problems with her parents, she was trying her best to adjust to her new life, was trying to put the past behind her.

Even so, she was still haunted by her brief encounter with Elijah and his world, couldn't shake off the feeling that it was unfinished business. After discussing it with her therapist, she reached out to Vanessa East and asked if she could visit Elijah again, suggested that having an army buddy might do him some good, but the woman turned her down flat.

"I was disappointed, but not especially surprised," Rose told Joshua a couple of days later, on one of the last of their gleanings trips. "She's proud and very protective, and it's likely that Declan Morrison had something to do with it, too. Vanessa needs him to keep Elijah's world up and running, which gives him a degree of power over her. Being the kind of person he is, he'd want to keep out anyone who threatens that. They both believe that they're protecting Elijah, but Declan doesn't want anything to change and Vanessa is scared that it will. They're stuck, so Elijah's stuck, too."

"You told me that he seemed happy, in his world," Joshua said. "And perhaps, despite their flaws and their fucked-up relationship, his mother and this Declan fellow

are trying to do their best for him.”

“You think I shouldn't have tried to interfere.”

“I think you've done all you can. Stories end, but life goes on.”

Joshua had suffered several minor recurrences of breakbone fever that put him in bed for a day or two, but late in spring he was laid out by a major attack that triggered a series of strokes, and he died a few days later. Rose wasn't invited to his cremation, but she did attend the scattering of his ashes a month later, a clear, warm night at the abandoned spaceport.

It was a square concrete platform and several large, square buildings set amongst the windswept maze of mud banks, reed beds, and tidal channels of the marsh's northeastern edge, and linked to the mainland by a service road running straight as a ruler on top of an embankment. Although the place was out of bounds to the public, no one, not even Toby Drury, did anything to stop the ceremony. Over a hundred people pitched up, and many more attended remotely: dozens of drones hung at different levels in the night air, transmitting the ceremony around the world.

A string quartet played, there were readings of poetry and a section of the manifesto Joshua had helped to draft, and friends and colleagues gave brief eulogies while pictures of him at all stages of his life shuffled across the side of the integration hangar where rockets and their payloads had once been mated. And then, in silence, six people carried flaming torches to the stub of broken girderwork, covered in Russian vine, which was all that remained of the spaceport's single gantry.

Rose was one of the torch bearers, amazed and humbled, waiting her turn as one by one the others lit the touch-papers of handmade firework rockets, and the rockets shot out above the dark marsh on erratic trajectories and flowered in crackling bursts of colored stars that fell in cascades and winked out before they hit the ground or the water, delivering portions of ashes and bone grit that would become part of the marsh's endless cycles.

And then it was Rose's turn. She stepped forward and lit the fuse of the last rocket, and it shot up with a banshee screech, drawing an arc of white flame across the night. Rose willed it on with heart and brain, wanting it to climb and climb until it breached the junkyard sky, but at last its arc peaked and inflected downward, and it burst in a chrysanthemum of sparks and the sparks dropped and winked out and the smoke of its ascent drifted and dispersed.

In the days that followed the sky was sheeted with low cloud, and gusts of warm rain blew across the marsh and the broad indifferent flood of the river. At last, clouds and rain gave way to a high-pressure system that edged in from the continent, and the marsh sweltered under a heat-bleached sky. Every day was hotter than the day before, and soon enough it was fire season again.