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FOR THE UNFEELING

By Andy Sparrow

Forward

I sit in my office in the wood-paneled train carriage, my arthritic fingers impatiently poised over the keys of my trusty Smith Corona, but no words come to mind.

Does anyone read Forwards these days? I'm not sure why I'm bothering . . .

The train is enshrouded in cloud so thick that I cannot even see the Liner only a few meters outside my window. I hear a soft clunk, and recognize the noise of the ramped doors swinging shut on the massive ship. I only realize it's launched when the cloud starts to thin.

Finally, I see the big puffy cumulonimbus scudding slowly and silently away from me across the desert towards the cliffs, then it elegantly rises into the sky.

"Au revoir," I like to say to the girls as they exit the carriage and walk into the fog, because I always really do hope to see them again.

Urgh, sounds creepy, and will make a great Forward! I try to recall my exact thoughts and then transcribe them onto paper. I love the 'ding' sound the typewriter makes when it tells you to push the return lever. It really feels like you've accomplished something . . .

Now I'm stumped again.

Weird really. I know exactly *what* to write about, but I cannot decide *where* to start.

"At the beginning", I hear you say. Thank you, but no, the beginning will not do. It's too far gone.

When then? My first meeting with Nova at the ballgame? Or when the Conduits arrived? No, I think it should be even more recent: The day when the quiet revolution started, which was also the day I met the quiet revolutionary, Aggy.

I ring the bell, and the train starts to lumber forwards on its long journey back to the city.

I check my notes and start to type.

Chapter One

We start, dear Reader, in a dusty street near Waterloo Station in London. Even though it was a beautiful evening, 'Lower Marsh' was almost empty of people, but for a few old guys in ragged coats, sharing a two-liter bottle of cider. Every table outside the pub was empty, mainly because everyone was inside. . . and silent.

Yes, the pub was packed but no one said a word, as they were all staring at the enormous flatscreen, rapt by the perfect, blossoming love before them. A billion viewers had been waiting for this moment between the teenagers for twenty episodes.

On the screen, Tom climbed the wisteria to the balcony and opened the French windows into the mansion. The beautiful Beatrice, in her low-cut, white nightgown turned to him and smiled. He smiled too, as he advanced towards her.

"My father would kill you if he knew you were here," she whispered breathlessly. He nodded as he moved closer. Their fingers touched for the first time and there was an audible gasp in the bar; some of the girls (and a few boys) had tears in their eyes.

Everyone was intent on the screen, except for one woman, who sat among the crowd and seemed more interested in the reactions of the viewers. She was smartly dressed and totally bald; not even an eyelash. Her tanned skull had clusters of golden freckles spattered across it. She smiled broadly as the audience (mostly dressed in Army fatigues) gasped when the teenagers' bodies pressed against each other. Their perfect nostrils flared as they hungrily inhaled each other's scent for the first time. Their lips almost touched but they heard a noise and pulled back. The tension rose in the bar until the audience couldn't take it anymore and started shouting

encouragement at the screen. Finally, the couple kissed, and everyone jumped up and cheered and hugged each other.

The bald woman had her eyes shut, a wide smile on her face.

On screen Beatrice and Tom were still kissing as the camera craned up. The end credits rolled as the voice-over announced:

"Shandling's Castle's Star-Crossed Lovers will be back at the same time tomorrow, though I don't know how they're gonna top that! But I said that yesterday didn't I? No wonder it's the world's most popular 'live' soap!"

Then, in a more official tone,

"Shandling's Castle is created by 'Earth Almighty®' and we are always looking for new content, so if you have stories, music, or any art you think we might like, please call 0800 1234 now."

On the other side of the world, on Shandling's Castle's sound-stage, the young actors were still snogging:

"And we're out!" shouted the Assistant Director. The stage lights went out, but the couple didn't break away from their embrace and used this new-found privacy to up their game.

"Save it for the screen babies!" shouted the Director over the tannoy, as Tom's hand approached second base, "Where are the child-wrangers! Tiggy! Zooey! Where are you?" Zooey, a slight girl with bronze skin peppered with golden freckles, appeared behind Tom and politely tapped him on the shoulder which he ignored as he found his target.

Tiggy was lying on the floor behind the set, blown away by the scene she just witnessed. She tried to regain her composure then stumbled on to the set and helped Zooey pull the lovers apart. Beatrice (real name Tamsin Carton-Pumpleroy) was led one way by Tiggy, her wrangler; Tom (real name Tom Tom) was led the other way by Zooey.

Tamsin was overjoyed by her first kiss but also heartbroken that they'd been separated.

"But I want him!" she complained, digging her heels in like a toddler, "I love him!" but Tiggy was surprisingly strong considering her diminutive size.

"I know Sweetheart," said Tiggy, wiping sweat from her forehead, "but you heard the boss. Save it for the screen. We want to Feel what you're emoting, and it has to be the real thing."

"So they're keeping us apart on purpose? Manipulating us?"

"Isn't that what great directors do to get the best possible performance from their actors?"

Tiggy, *still* feeling completely overwhelmed, was *still* firmly pushing Tamsin towards her dressing room, which was a long walk away, purposefully on the opposite side of the building from Tom's,

"Listen. You're in the biggest live, daytime soap in the world right now. A billion viewers! Relish this moment: How half a billion men in the world are imagining making love to you right now?"

"Ee-ooh!" shrieked Tamsin. Tiggy cringed as she realized she'd said the wrong thing.

In the packed bar in London, everyone was overcome by what they'd just witnessed, and much spontaneous snogging had broken out between strangers. James, a scrawny teen with a shock of

dark curls, the busboy at that very bar in Waterloo, looked longingly at Jo, beautiful blonde Bombardier with the Royal Artillery. She was one of the many dressed in army fatigues.

"That was a great way to go out," she said to him, a wicked glint in her eye, "let's kiss like that right now, like star-crossed lovers, before I go to war." She moved towards James. He hesitated, should this be their first kiss? But then he couldn't resist the long-awaited invitation and leant into it. The teenagers made it long and passionate, trying to emulate what they'd just seen on screen. Her friends cheered.

"About time," said one, as she dragged Jo off him, "come on, or we'll miss the train! The boat leaves at one!"

"Send me a poem every week Jaimie!" she shouted as she was swept into the street by the flow of exuberant soldiers, "and you should call that number, you're so talented!"

James was floating on air but also forlorn. After so long they'd finally kissed and then she was gone. Gone to the never-ending, brutal war with the Reds from which she may never return. Could he run after her and beg her not to go? He could, but it wouldn't make any difference. She'd say the same thing as last time: She was born a soldier, her Howitzer was her Destiny, and she craved the Kill.

How could he love someone with such a psychotic streak? and what was he doing here in this place? Fuck it, if she's following her destiny... He retrieved his jacket from his locker.

Tiggy, still nudging the girl forward, said,

"Oh, the script arrived for tomorrow. I think you'll be very excited by your scenes, building up to seeing him and then being alone with him when his mother goes out for the day."

Tamsin perked up a bit and gave up resisting Tiggy. Quite exciting, being able to read in advance, the trajectory of one's own love affair. She'd almost gone insane waiting for the writers to get them together. It had been excruciating.

As Tiggy lead the way, Tamsin examined her Wrangler, who had been two inches taller than her when she joined the show six months ago. Now, Tamsin was an inch taller than her. Other than Tiggy's golden brown, freckly skin, she physically resembled Tamsin's own teenage sister, with the long limbs, skinny body and slightly oversized head. But unlike her sister, Tiggy had a new hairstyle every day, ranging from today's short and punky, to long flowing locks in various shades. Her big, wide-apart eyes remind Tamsin of a deer she saw while hiking.

"So, if I'm being manipulated, is my love real? If Russell is making me fall in love with him, that means it's manufactured, doesn't it?"

"It Feels totally real to me."

"But did he know we fancied each other at school?"

Tiggy put an arm around Tamsin's shoulder,

"He definitely clocked your chemistry at the casting."

"Clocked? Is that slang from your own country?"

Tiggy looked at the ceiling,

"Clocked? I guess so. I meant he'd *noted* your chemistry."

They had reached the dressing room and Tamsin skipped inside to read the script.

Tiggy shouted, "Have a good . . . " at the slamming door then nodded to the Security guard,

"Let me know if she leaves the room before her Mum arrives, okay?"

He nodded too, then said something under his breath. She paused for a moment, turned, then thought better of it and walked on.

James stared at his phone. The show was over, so he should've been collecting glasses, but he bypassed them and walked outside while dialling 0800 1234.

He bumped into the bald woman who was lighting a cigarette,

"Sorry Ma'am. Sorry. I . . ." then his call was answered, "Hello, I just saw the ad at the end of Shandling's Castle?"

"Great! What's your speciality?"

"Writing stories? I've been filling notebooks since I was a kid, just never thought—"

"Glarragh!" the bald woman shouted.

"Who was that?"

"Some woman? I think she's a refugee? She was just clearing her throat."

"Can I speak to her please?"

James passed his phone to the woman who spoke to the girl in a language James couldn't understand. She was strangely attractive with her eyes set so far-apart.

She passed the phone back to James.

"We always need stories!" said the girl, "do you write anything else?"

"Well, also poetry—"

"Oh we love poets!"

"Really? Poets?"

"Absolutely, you're a special breed. What's your name please?"

"James Faulkner."

"On this number, yeah? And are you an early riser or a night owl James?"

"Night owl, definitely."

"Excellent! We work in shifts here. Us night owls live on L.A. time, so could we see you tonight? In an hour?"

"At the Millbank building? Sure!"

"Awesome James, I'm sending you a Text now - can't wait! Bye!" He smiled, and hung up.

The bald woman turned to him,

"Going to show your work to Earth Almighty?"

"Yup, exciting."

"That's great! They're going to love you; I can just Feel it."

James smiled and nodded,

"What did you say to her?"

"I told her you needed special treatment because you'd just waved goodbye to your girl."

James shrugged,

"Not sure she's my girl. We're neighbours and I've loved her since primary school, but I never thought I had a shot—"

"Because she's a ten and you're a six?"

"No, I wasn't going to—"

"Oh, sorry," the woman hunched over in shame, "because you've been in the friend-zone too long?"

"Exactly, so that kiss came out of the blue."

"Maybe inspired by the scene on Shandling's Castle?" she asked.

James nodded,

"You're from . . . the Yellows aren't you?"

"No, the Reds. I was tortured for speaking out against the war, so I fled here."

James shook his head,

"I'm so sorry, I hope life is better here?"

"Generally it is, thank you, except for minority who think I'm a spy."

"Then what possessed you to sit down in the bar among all those Soldiers? They surely can't be your biggest fans?"

"I was here for research. but, yes the atmosphere was truly threatening, so I was relieved when the soap came on and it calmed down."

"They're just hard-wired that way, no one can do anything about them, sorry."

"Thank you for your empathy," the woman said, reaching out her hand, "Goodnight."

James shook her frail hand, and she collapsed into giggles, like a love-struck schoolgirl. She finally recovered, apologized, then tottered off.

James watched her go then got out his phone. He'd just had a great idea for a poem for Jo. He typed some lines while he walked to the South Bank.

Tiggy knocked on the door of the Edit Suite and entered. There, in the darkened room, the live episode was being edited for the 'on demand' service. The Director, Russell, the hairiest man she'd ever seen, was taking advantage of this to make minor tweaks to his live cuts between

cameras, instructing his editor, Peezy, in split-second changes. He turned to Tiggy, his little eyes peering out from beneath brows that Tiggy could almost swear were growing before her eyes,

"All good?"

"Yes, she's a hundred percent into it."

Russell heard her voice crack and turned,

"Are you okay Tiggy?"

"I don't know, I feel strange. When Tamsin was doing the love scene it just blew me away, and I had to lie down. It was *that* powerful."

"Intriguing," he said, going to the water cooler, "sit on the sofa and drink some water while we wait for Zooey, okay?"

She did so and Russell went back to his work. Tiggy watched, not fully understanding the microsecond difference between the two versions, but appreciating the artistry involved.

Zooey entered and she bumped fists with Tiggy. Both felt a spark which made them jump.

Peezy, another girl with the dark skin and golden freckles, noticed and shouted,

"Hey, don't waste a drop of those Feels on each other. Save that for later."

"How's Tom?" Russell asked Zooey.

"He's soooo horny, he's probably knocking one out right now!"

The Director laughed,

"And how are you Zooey? Blown away by their performance, like Tiggy?"

"Yeah, I'm actually a bit dizzy, still."

"Well let's see what we've got," said Russell, giving up his seat so the two wranglers could sit either side of the Editor.

Zooney placed one hand on a touchpad, making various screens light up with Bar charts and random patterns of colour. Another screen showed Tom's point of view; not a faked point of view, but as seen through the boy's eyes as he waited below the balcony to play out the scene. Tiggy touched her pad and similar screens lit up, and Beatrice's POV appeared.

Peezy checked the levels:

"Ready to recall? From the top?" She started the video playback, pressed the 'Record' button, then got her long fingers ready on the faders.

Russell stood beside them with his hand on a Joystick, and watched as the three of them shut their eyes. On the central screen Tom climbed the wisteria to the balcony on Camera Four, a wide of the exterior set. Cut to interior wide, and the dramatic scene began.

Their proximity brought their heartrates and adrenaline up a few notches, and they moved even closer. As Tom and Beatrice's hands touched for the first time, other screens burst into life and Peezy gasped. The screens pulsed with deep reds and purples.

As their noses almost touched, they inhaled each other's redolence and other screens lit up with random patterns.

When they kissed, more screens burst into life and the reds and purples exploded and Peezy started to sob, "So pure..."

Tiggy nodded, smiled and hummed a low D minor as she tasted Tom's delicious tongue dancing with her own. She could've stayed there forever with those all-consuming Feels, but it suddenly ended when they were pulled apart by their wranglers.

Peezy, holding her head like it was about to shatter, said,

"That was the most Feels I've ever experienced at one time, and there was a new one in there too, from Beatrice, really powerful, what was that?"

Tiggy looked at the ceiling,

"I think it's Love, isn't it Russell?"

"From what little Feels I get through the Joystick, I'd say it is Tiggy, I think we'll remember this moment, guys."

Zooey was more dizzy, now she'd Felt what Tamsin was emoting as well.

"Shall we play it back and all Feel it again?" asked Peezy eagerly. But Tiggy stood up and grabbed Zooey's hand,

"Maybe later, me and Zooey thought we might go and re-enact the scene before the Feels fade."

"Can I come?" asked Peezy, but they were already shutting the door.

Russell moved back to the desk, "That was very interesting wasn't it?"

"It was awesome!"

"So the Feels were that powerful for you? So no need to overdub any enhancements?"

Peezy shook her head, "Those Feels *are* the enhancements we'll be overdubbing onto everything else! I've never experienced anything like that before. So pure."

Russell typed a note into his phone then nodded and smiled,

"Cool. Well let's take a fag break then get the other Conduits in for their Feels. I'll text Ronny and Angie; oh, and there were a couple of POVs when they're about to kiss that we can use as well."

"Can I send this scene to Madam Nova, with the two raw Feels?" asked Peezy, pressing a button marked 'Print' on the dispenser. A small chrome egg fell into her hand, and she held it up, "she's gonna love it."

Russell, still typing, shook his head, as they exited the suite and headed for the stairs,

"Let's wait. We should run it by Legal first, before she knows anything, culpability-wise."

"Why?"

"Because we're recording the *real* Feels of sixteen-year-olds. Not the *acted* Feels. They're really feeling this, and I believe this is the first time we, or any other production, has done this - except maybe porno. It's unknown territory."

"What about Reality shows?"

Russell smirked, "They're no more real than Shandling's Castle is."

Peezy shrugged as they climbed the stairs, "You're the boss. But it's actually a great idea isn't it?

A whole new genre, don't you think? Could triple company profits."

Russell raised his eyebrows and nodded, impressed by his editor's entrepreneurial streak,

"Yes, I guess so. All the more reason to take it to Legal. For now, let's overdub some stock Feels on there."

They stood on the rooftop and looked out over the Earth Almighty lot, soundstages jostling against each other as far as the eye could see. Russell put his phone in his pocket and lit a cigar. He heard an explosion and instinctively ducked. In the distance, a mini mushroom cloud curled skyward. Was that another drone strike from the Reds, or a Special Effect from the War & Gore Department?

Russell shrugged, having become quite jaded about the never-ending war. Even with that going on, this really was the Golden Age for Creators, where they were fêted above all else by Earth Almighty, the conglomerate that had pulled the world out of recession and back into prosperity. But was being Showrunner on Shandling's Castle going to be the pinnacle for him? The grinding schedule left him little time for his family and no time for his own script, which of course, now needed major rewrites, in light of today's revelation about the Feels.

He was a bit envious that he couldn't feel the full-blown power of the Feels like the Conduits, but then he had good-old-fashioned empathy, and he wouldn't swap places for anything.

Peezy lit her cigarette and inhaled, rolling the little egg between her long fingers. She was smiling like the Cheshire Cat.

On the backlot, behind the War & Gore soundstages, there stood a set, used for post-apocalyptic productions. At that moment, it was employed as a backdrop to a Recruitment Film for the war effort.

A Controlled Explosion was being prepared by the SFX guys, while the Director Franco Z; the Star, Tad Gratch; and his body-double talked through the scene. Tad was impatient and wanted to get back to his game of Animal Crossing.

"Okay Tad," said Franco, showing him the storyboard, "we'll shoot you running towards the mark where the drone will strike, then we need a cutaway of your running feet which we can then cut back to your double for the Controlled Explosion."

Franco turned to a small, golden freckled girl, sitting by his side,

"Are you okay Cherry? Focussed on Tad?"

She nodded. She admired Tad and the way he could generate emotions on cue. 'Action' was called and immediately she was Feeling and recording Tad's panic, cleverly mixed with courage and determination as he ran through shot.

Next they did the close-up of Tad's boots but this time he just kept running, off the set and back to his executive dressing room and his precious retro game.

It was another twenty minutes before the bomb was buried below the mark and everything was ready.

The stuntman Joff, dressed exactly like Tad, waited to replicate his action. Cherry focussed on him and Felt his excitement. Four cameras turned over and 'Action' was called. Joff ran towards the mark which exploded late, sending a mushroom cloud high into the air, along with the various body-parts of luckless Joff. Cherry fell over, flattened by the Feels coming from Joff, who seemingly was still alive. Cherry saw through his eyes as his head and spine did a barrel-roll into the heavens, then gracefully glided downwards through the mushroom cloud, before headbutting the roof of War & Gore 4. Joff, oblivious to the headbutt because of the searing pain all over his 'body', blinked twice, tried to say "Shit!", then felt himself rolling again.

Franco watched the head/spine combo as it rolled off the roof, spiraled down, then bounced a couple of times and fell into the lap of the Makeup Girl who had been knocked over by the un-controlled explosion. The Director couldn't help but chuckle. He looked for Cherry and found her fallen by his side,

"Did you get that Cherry?"

Cherry moaned, which Franco took to be a yes.

"Joff's blinking Cherry. Is he still alive?"

Cherry moaned, which Franco took to be a yes. But then Joff stopped blinking and Cherry sat up and shook her head.

Franco called his 3rd AD,

"Get Cherry to the Edit Suite now, to lay down those Feels."

Then he became aware of the crew running around like headless chickens, covered in blood and bits of Joff.

"My first Real Death, recorded for posterity," he chuckled with glee, then turned to his PA, "Call Legal, tell them I need to speak with Malcolm."

Tiggy and Zooey sat at the back of the shuttle bus, meandering its way through the lot towards carpark H. Like horny teenagers, they were having one last snog while recalling the love scene.

"It's faded," said Zooey, "almost gone forever . . . "

"I'm not sure," mused Tiggy, "something has stuck around. It's not the Feels themselves, but it's kind of awakened something in me? Or planted a seed, maybe? You've been displaying a real boyish energy lately – could that come from Tom?"

Zooey nodded in agreement, "Yeah, I think you're right. I recently noticed that I've had a vague desire to watch sport!"

Peezy got on at the next stop. She pretended to sit at the front, next to an old character actor who huffed and puffed, then she laughed and walked back to them. Tiggy said,

"What a day huh? That was my first experience of real Love."

"It could be addictive," nodded Zooey, "shame it's faded."

"How much would you pay to feel it again?" asked Peezy, holding up the little chrome egg.

"Seriously?" frowned Tiggy, "you're gonna charge us for a Feel that we created?"
She snatched the egg from Peezy and sank into the seat, purring.

Zooey shook her head in disbelief at Peezy who shook her head back,

"I wasn't gonna charge you, I was just asking cos I printed a few while I was alone."
She dipped into her bag and pulled out a handful.

Zooey picked one and mused for a moment,

"A tenner for a five-minute hire?"

Peezy nodded,

"Maybe I could set up a booth down at the Mall?"

Tiggy sat up, smiling,

"The possibilities are endless."

Aggy, a wide-eyed, slender girl with very few freckles got on the bus carrying a crash helmet. Her faded blue hoodie complimented her golden-brown skin. She saw them, smiled, then walked to the back and sat next to Peezy.

"I saw the show - amazing - can't wait for the Feels," she cocked her head at Tiggy,
"unless you've got a little taste left over for me now?"

"I can do better than that," said Peezy, holding up an egg, "only a tenner for five minutes."

"Peezy, you are shameless! Here," said Zooey, handing Aggy her egg.
Aggy took the egg and curled into Peezy's lap, humming a D minor.

When Aggy came round, Peezy was gone.

"Wow!" was all she could say, until, "and what about your boy Zooey? Is he in love?"

Zooey shrugged,

"It's a sprinkle of love, on a steaming bowl of lust."

Tiggy leant forward and whispered,

"Tamsin's Feels are amazing and, weirdly, we both think they've changed us. You get to record a lot of people's real emotions, don't you?"

Aggy nodded.

"Well do you think they're rubbing off on you?"

Aggy nodded again, "Absolutely. I'm recording the Feels which fade, but absorbing the emotions from within those Feels, and they're not fading."

"But, spiritually, is that a good thing?" asked Zooey.

"Probably not, in my case," shrugged Aggy, "but if I was Feeling love like that all day, I can't see a downside."

Zooey nodded in acceptance, then said,

"This is your stop Aggy."

Aggy pressed the bell to get off, then waved as she jumped off outside Soundstage116. She showed her pass at Entrance F and entered the cool, dark, cavernous space. Aggy would've liked to be a wrangler like Tiggy. It would be cool to Feel those raw, young emotions, before 'life experience' seemed to shut down most adults' feelings entirely. But until that dream came true it

was dirty porno on the One-One-Six. She checked the map, then found her way through the rabbit warren of filthy scenarios to her designated set, a hospital ward.

She was greeted and hugged by the soundstage's 'Big Cheese', Gus, who gave her butt a little squeeze. Aggy's sense of smell was rudimentary but she could've recognized Gus's acrid aroma blindfold. Whenever he approached her, she instinctively held her breath and blocked all Feels, as his whole being was obsessed with sex. He pointed to a girl dressed in a Nurse's uniform,

"She's your target. Elena."

Aggy stood behind a screen which was close to the hospital bed and focussed on the Nurse. She could feel Elena's nerves as she stood on her mark next to her bedridden 'patient', a big, muscular man covered in War Tattoos, with a prop bandage wrapped around his skull. He had the dead eyes of an infantryman; a close-combat killer.

Then 'Action' was called and Elena's emotions were all over the place; but none of her Feels were inviting this man to penetrate her, but he did so, violently and painfully; Aggy sank to the floor and hugged her knees. She wanted to run, just like the girl did, but both were trapped, trapped in a job they hated.

Or were they? She was not trapped. She could jump a flight home that day, but she'd be bored by bedtime. What about Elena? She was distracting herself by thinking of the money that she was going to send home to her family. So maybe she *was* trapped? Elena was thinking, "It'll be over soon," while pretending to orgasm.

Aggy curled into a ball with her hands over her ears.

"It'll be over soon," she told herself . . . for another five minutes.

"And cut!"

Relief flooded the Nurse. She ran from the set, and they were disconnected. Gus found Aggy crouched behind the screen. He sat beside her and gave her a hug.

"How was she?" he asked.

"Scared and in pain," she answered.

"Yes, I'm sorry, I should've warned you."

"How would that make any difference?"

"Good point. Sorry, my regular girl didn't turn up."

"Like last time and the time before? Hardly surprising."

"I'm sorry Aggy, you're the best Conduit I've got. All the editors say it. Your Recordings are head and shoulders above the rest, and I don't want to lose you . . . "

To Aggy he looked sheepish for a moment, but then defiant? Or victorious?

"Hey, I've just had an idea. Would you prefer not to do this type anymore?"

"I would," she answered immediately.

"Well, let's try something else, and if you're good at it, then I'll make sure you never have to."

It felt to Aggy as if Gus was trying to appear magnanimous, even though she knew differently.

"Let's get those awful Feels out of you, then I'm gonna take you to Wardrobe."

In London, James arrived for his appointment with Earth Almighty and found himself at the back of a long, snaking queue of young people. He cursed, realizing he'd been duped. He'd be there all night, waiting, for what? It was like that TV talent show where ten thousand auditions were

whittled down to one winner. And here came the PAs to start the whittling. A group of refugee girls with their wide-set eyes and beautiful freckles, were working their way around the line, in a seemingly random manner. A couple of them concentrated on applicants carrying guitars, others on teenagers with portfolios.

One made a beeline for him. She had a black bob à la Audrey Hepburn and was wearing a stripey T-shirt over skinny jeans; her eyes were as wide as her smile. She said Hi in a very friendly manner and asked his name.

"James Faulkner, I have some of my stories with—"

"But you're a poet, right?"

He was surprised,

"er, yeah, how—"

She was writing on a small pad,

"I love poetry. It goes over my head a lot of the time, but I still appreciate the intent."

"Really? I'm—"

"Come to floor twenty-four and give this to Reception," she handed him her note, "I'm so looking forward to spending more time with you," then she darted off to speak to another in the line. He looked at the paper. It had a scrawl in red marker, like his doctor's prescriptions: illegible. There was a lot of excitement in the line as everyone seemed to have been accepted.

On the hour, the doors were opened, and the snaking line was quickly swallowed by the building, and they were directed according to the paper they held. Along with twenty others, he took the designated elevator to the twenty-fourth floor and waited only moments among his excited compatriots before handing over the note to one of the Receptionists.

"Booth twenty-seven, on the left-hand side, just go in, she won't be long," he said, pointing down one of four corridors. Among the bustle, he found the door and entered a small, windowless office with a table and two chairs. The door swung shut and all went quiet. He sat for long enough to wonder how many hours he would wait when the door opened, and the same girl rushed in.

"Thank you so much for coming James. I'm Heidi. You'll appreciate how many people I have to see tonight so I'm going to jump straight in and ask if I can hear some of your poetry please?"

James, a bit shocked, opened his bag and retrieved a folder. He flicked through the papers, picked a sheet he thought was one of his best and handed it to her.

"Could you read it to me? I find I get more from the words when they're said by the author?"

He smiled and nodded then started to read. It was one of a series he wrote to Jo and while he read the words he was reminded of his exact emotions at the time. When he'd finished, he looked up and Heidi had tears in her eyes.

"Who's the girl?"

"My friend Jo. She's in the army, so is constantly leaving me behind."

"I'm so sorry James. But they're all heroes, right?"

He nodded, begrudgingly, "We just said goodbye again. She's on her way to the front line with her beloved howitzer."

"What's a howitzer?"

"A cannon the size of a house," he replied bitterly.

Aggy, dressed as a Doctor and carrying a 'medical bag' which had been miked up by the Sound Department, knocked on the girl's dressing room door and entered,

"I've come to examine you Elena. If you have damage I can offer you an extra two thousand in compensation and a soothing balm massage."

"That was a little stilted," Gus said in her earpiece, "but not bad for your first performance, try to loosen up a little."

Elena, compliant in her trauma, lay back on the daybed and removed her knickers. Aggy had spent the last year pitying these kids, as they crossed line after line and hated themselves a little bit more each time. Was this a line for her? Surely it was. She didn't have to do this, and had argued against it. But she wanted to please Gus, even after he had inflicted that horror on her again. Why was that? Was that part of the art? The art of Directing?

She knelt and looked at Elena's hairless vulva. It was red where the guy had been slapping her, as were her buttocks. Aggy touched the girl's labia and they both recoiled: The girl from the soreness, Aggy from the Feels pouring from the girl. Not just from the soreness but also an overwhelming despair, regret and emptiness.

"I'm sorry. But I am going to have to examine you internally."
The girl nodded and Aggy steeled herself against the Feels, then gently inserted a lubricated finger,

"Oh yes, definitely damaged, but not irreparably," Aggy said, "I'm going to perform the balm massage now," then started moving her finger and thumb. Gus had wanted her to use her tongue but that was crossing another line, a line too far. She shut her eyes, so he'd never know.

She'd recorded scenes like this many times, so was pretty sure she knew where the girl's clitoris was; though not so convinced about the G-spot, which seemed more unique to the individual. Once she felt the girl relax and succumb to the pleasure, Aggy started recording, hating herself for caving.

Heidi couldn't believe the power of the Feels that had emanated from this boy while he read. On the one hand, she wanted to go tell her boss immediately, but on the other, she never wanted to leave his side.

She said,

"How about writing a poem now? You're obviously feeling a lot of emotions, yes?"

He thought for a moment then nodded. She smiled that wide smile and looked like she was about to get up and leave then stopped and asked,

"Can I sit with you while you write? I promise I won't disturb you."

"But what about all your other—"

"You are more important to me right now."

He shrugged and nodded. He'd written in cafés, on buses, in class, so why not in this booth with this strange girl? He thought of the notes he made earlier and opened his phone, Then he summoned those demons and started typing . . .

An hour later, he finished, and the girl seemed to be even more of an emotional wreck than he was. Was that sweat or tears on her T-shirt?

He felt sheepish about showing her, but she was happy to wait. She didn't want to read it anyway; she wanted him to read it to her. Finally he did, which was very emotional for him, and

she was all over the place, sobbing and pulling at her shirt. When he'd recovered, she seemed better too and said,

"An anti-war poem written about a boy's love for a warmonger. It's tragic and beautiful and . . . I . . . we want you James. You're a genius, and we can get your work out to an enormous audience."

"Seriously? For poetry?"

"You have no idea!" she laughed, "I want you to come meet my CEO."

James followed her back down the corridor then they took the stairs to the floor above, and entered a big office with a view over the Thames.

"Hello Sir, I am Heidi, I just messaged you about James the poet . . ."

A tall man greeted them and shook James's hand, then took a step back, like he'd had a shock.

"James, this is Sona, our boss," said Heidi, "listen, I've got to go see about something right now, but don't leave before I get back okay?"

James, overwhelmed by the speed of things nodded and smiled and waved as she ran out the room.

"James," said Sona, taking a seat, "Heidi has recommended you and we want to offer you a deal where we have exclusive rights to distribute *everything* you produce and we'll split the proceeds seventy-thirty, how does that sound?"

"I'm the seventy?"

"Yes, you're the seventy," Sona said, holding out his hand.

"Do we get a contract drawn up?"

"What for? There's nothing else to be agreed is there? At Earth Almighty, seventy-thirty is standard for Creators, and it'll all be explained in the App. Heidi will set you up."

"No lawyers?"

"I'm not sure they even exist anymore do they?"

They both laughed and shook hands, for a bit too long, in James's opinion. He pulled away but Sona seemed reluctant to let go.

Back at the one-one-six, in the Edit Suite, Gus's editor, the very freckly Steffie had synced up the filmed performance of the Hospital set, the painful Feels (on a very low intensity) and the sound from the dressing room and Gus was happy,

"She sounded like she was having a really good time!"

"Yes," agreed Aggy, massaging her temples, "she certainly wasn't faking. I've never Felt one so powerful before, it was on another level."

"Great, then let's lay down the Feels."

Aggy placed her palm on the touchpad. She noticed Gus putting his hand on the Joystick for this one, when he hadn't for the painful one, and she couldn't help but feel a little miffed. She shut her eyes and Recalled her time with Elena, which made Steffie vibrate in her seat.

"You're right Aggy," Steffie whispered, wiping sweat from her forehead, "I've never Felt one so potent, and so nuanced. Your interpretation is just . . . "

Gus, his eyes wide, agreed,

"Wow Aggy, we've discovered another talent of yours!"

Steffie then played the whole thing again, but wasn't convinced,

"The mix of pleasure and pain is difficult. I can't get the levels right."

"I guess it's going to be a matter of personal taste, isn't it?" asked Aggy, immediately disgusted at herself for adding to the conversation.

"Could we leave those Feels on different channels?" suggested Gus, "so it's up to the Unfeeling how they want to balance them."

Steffie thought about that for a moment,

"It's definitely doable. With the App, they can already control which camera they're viewing, and basics such as the playback speed, and the balance, so why not the intensity of the Feels? Shall I contact Software?"

Gus gave her the thumbs up,

"Wow, what a day! There's something in the air! We're innovating and Aggy has earned herself a new career recording overdubs at a much higher rate of pay."

Gus mused, staring at the ceiling,

"In fact, I've just had another idea," he hesitated, "I'll have to run it by Legal, but if they okay it, why don't we actually shoot a tasteful scene of you doing it with Elena, and make it all about her orgasms?"

Aggy looked doubtful so Gus persisted,

"You'd be a star immediately, and you'd be raking it in. Most Conduits look exactly the same to me, but you are beautiful."

Aggy shrugged,

"You think I'm beautiful?"

"Absolutely."

"Is it because of my freckles? Or lack thereof?"

"It definitely helps," he said, "but your face is very sensual and also you've got the body of a teenager with those skinny hips but those awesomely perky boobs, and that fits right in with one of the Unfeeling's most popular searches."

Aggy was not convinced and stared at the ceiling. She also wanted to correct him on his use of the word sensual. Gus got impatient,

"So what do you think? You'll be rich!"

Aggy was attracted by the money. But still, she'd known a lot of porn stars, Felt them right through, and none of them were happy about what they were doing, however much money they made. She zipped up her hoodie,

"Steffie, can you print a copy of the orgasms for me please?"

Steffie looked to Gus, who nodded, so she pressed the button and handed Aggy the egg.

"Gus, thanks for the offer, but no," she said as she exited the Edit Suite.

Gus shook his head and smiled,

"She doesn't mean that," he said, confidently, "she'll come around, you'll see," he nodded to himself, "she's such a pushover."

Steffie shook her head, but said nothing.

Heidi ran down the hall to a Recording Studio and fired up the desk. She was bursting with the Feels this boy had produced. She pressed the Record button then put her hand on the touchpad and Recalled.

She'd been alerted by the Scout that James was extraordinary, and she'd known it the moment she'd felt him, even among the crowd outside; there had been something bubbling inside him that set him apart. Then he'd been reading his poem and she knew he meant those words, and felt those feelings so powerfully, and projected them so majestically that she'd been totally overwhelmed.

But then he'd been writing, and his previous Feels were completely overshadowed.

Tears! Never before had she felt such . . . what? She had no words to describe it, but it was beautiful and sad and joyous and doom-laden and . . . then, while Recalling, she was crying again. Sobbing. Laughing. Purring. Sighing. Smiling. Crying.

Then it was over, recorded for posterity, and she was drenched in her own tears.

What had possessed her to ask him to write a poem? And then ask to stay while he did it? Had the Spirit touched her? How could it - so far from home? Or had she just not wanted to leave his presence? If she was honest with herself, it was definitely the latter.

More importantly though, had she just come up with a whole new genre of Feel?

She pressed Print and a small egg fell into her hand. She pocketed it, then went back to James and Sona.

Heidi handed Sona the egg and he sat at his desk.

"Have you downloaded the App?"

"The Earth Almighty App?" James asks, nodding, "of course, had it for years."

Heidi smiled,

"Go to Advanced, then tap Creator and type in this number—"

"What for?"

"To accept the contract and access your Advance?"

James immediately did so and there, on the screen, was his balance: £9,999.

"So now, if you enable NFC you can use your phone at any wireless paypoint," gushed Heidi, finding it hard to be normal around this Genius Poet, "and you can also set up your direct debits and everything . . . so . . ."

Sona had been dipping in and out of the Feels on the egg. He was so overwhelmed he had to drop it. He nodded to Heidi,

"Let's get James set up in a Recording Studio on four. Would that be okay James? If we recorded you reading your poetry or writing some more?"

James smiled and nodded enthusiastically.

"I can do that with him, Sir?" volunteered Heidi.

"He's your discovery Heidi. Go for it."

Heidi was overjoyed, just like James was. She skipped alongside him, never wanting to leave his side again.

Aggy rode her Honda back to the wrong side of the valley, fuming at Gus. The man who lied to her, disrespected her, and groped her regularly.

So she's the best is she? All the editors say that do they? And he wants to make her into a porn star does he? Nuance, indeed! The bastard!

Or was she angry at herself?

For having taken the job at the one-one-six in the first place?

For complicity in the exploitation of the kids who flooded into Hollywood with similar dreams to her own, and ended up also settling for the one-one-six?

For allowing herself to be taken advantage of?

For taking on board all of Elena's despair which she couldn't seem to shake?

For taking that egg home, that she knew she wouldn't be able to resist using later?

Russell drove his golfcart at a leisurely pace across the Earth Almighty Lot towards where he hoped the Legal team still resided. He took a left into a Brooklyn Street being dressed for a 1920s Gangster Movie. Were the streets of all lots the same? All populated by clichés? A phalanx of Roman Soldiers walked to lunch behind an animatronic T-Rex; Daleks, trying to cross, but troubled by a shallow sidewalk wavered next to two props men carrying an enormous sheet of glass who were trying to cross the same street.

He found the building and stopped outside. It was eerily quiet. He remembered it as a seething cauldron of all that was worst about Hollywood: the sequels, the franchises, the reboots, the bottom line. It was the place where Creativity came to die.

He took a deep breath then walked through the door into a cavernous foyer. A lone receptionist sat behind a desk surreptitiously smoking. There was a cobweb on her monitor.

"Can I help you?"

"Hi, I need to speak to Malcolm."

"The captain of the sinking ship?" she laughed, "top floor," then went back to reading her book.

He took the elevator and emerged into a wide atrium with expansive views over the lot and the city beyond. It was deserted but for one man sitting in a massive, swiveling armchair, staring out the window.

"Gus? Porno legend of the one-one-six?"

"Russell? Doyen of daytime drama?"

They hugged, then looked at one another.

"Still hairy," said Gus.

"Still smelly," said Russell.

"Hey, we're only human!" laughed Gus.

A little man burst out of his office, carrying a box,

"What's all the commotion out here? I'm trying to sleep!"

They turned to see their old friend Malcolm waddling towards them and they laughed and hugged.

"What the fuck's going on here Malcolm? Where is everyone?"

"The lawyers? They were all let go a year or so ago. We didn't need the blood-suckers, but we didn't know that, until Nova fired them all."

"I heard about that, they were replaced by the App," said Gus, "and apparently Harvard is converting to an Art and Music school."

"As is this whole block," smiled Malcolm, holding up his box of personal effects, "I'm moving to a suite in Nova's building. Just me and the App."

"So just one blood-sucker then?"

They laughed and sat in the swivel chairs,

"Hey, I make about a tenth of what you guys make, but now we're all paid what we're worth, and I have no problem with that. I want for nothing, except maybe another bottle of—" Russell and Gus both pulled bottles of 'Glenfiddich 50-Year-Old' out of their bags. Malcolm smiled and laughed like he'd seen his kid take his first steps.

"Awesome. I'll get the Cocktail Trolley, and we can have Sidecars."

"Maybe later Malcolm," said Russell, "like I said on the phone, I've got a conundrum." They leant in, conspiratorially,

"On Shandling's Castle we shot the scenes of the two kid's first kiss and them falling in love."

"I love your work, never miss it," said Malcolm. Russell bowed his head in appreciation,

"Well, the Conduits say they're not acting. They're really falling in love, and they've never felt anything like it."

"Wow!"

"Amazing!"

"It was just an experiment, but I think we may be onto something."

Chapter Two

Tiggy and Zooey parked outside their dilapidated block on the wrong side of the Valley. They saw Aggy's little Honda locked to the railings. Upstairs, the tiny studio was the best they could find with the money they made. But even if they could have afforded to live in Venice Beach, no one would've rented to them. At least here, they were among their own kind.

Zooey prepared a meal while Tiggy took off her false eyebrows and lashes, then opened her laptop to find an email from a friend at home, asking for updates on Shandling's Castle:

"Are the kids ever going to get together?" Tiggy read aloud to Zooey.

"Oh, she's connecting to 'On Demand' isn't she?"

"Yes, so she's a few days behind."

"So she's got a lot to look forward to."

"I'll just say," she said as she typed, *'Today's episode resolved the question of 'Will They - Won't They'*, she loves tiny tidbits to share with the neighbours. She's so proud that we're working on everyone's favourite show."

"Don't tell her about our possible Feely breakthrough though."

"No, I'll wait for Russell's okay on that." She pressed Send as Zooey brought the food to the table.

Back on the top floor of Legal, the men sat smoking cigars in an easy silence. The three had known each other since they'd started on the Lot as teenage runners, working their way to the top at Universal, later engulfed by Earth Almighty.

"Sounds like you're elevating this whole Feely thing to another level; so what's your conundrum, Russ?"

"One, they're underage, and two, they are their *actual* Feels (not *acted* Feels) being recorded, and three, they don't know the Conduits are even doing it."

"But *no one* knows the Conduits are doing it."

"Exactly. Don't you think it's time to come clean?"

Tiggy and Zooey were watching the repeat of Shandling's Castle while eating their meal. Their tastebuds were few and far between so, for them, it was more about textures and temperatures: Scandinavian Krisp-Rolls, topped with Ice Cream and Jellybeans, with a Vinegar dip was tonight's feast.

There had been only a few occasions when they'd Recorded someone who was eating, but taste, like smell and touch, was so subtle that the results were never very impressive. It was people's emotions that they could Record and Recall the most accurately.

"What shall we do?"

"We could go down to Sunset and Feel the freaks?"

"That didn't end so well last time, did it?"

"Then let's go to the Cineplex in the Mall. They have old movies with added Feels; shall I check the times—"

Her phone buzzed and she turned it over. It was her Family Tracker App: "Tamsin is on the move, but her Mum is still home. Check your app, Zooey. See where Tom is."

"He's on the move too."

They compared their screens and saw the two dots converging.

"Let's go."

Malcolm dropped his spent cigar into the ashtray. Time to come clean?

They sat in silence for a minute before Malcolm turned to the Porn Baron of the one-one-six,

"How about you Gus? Love your work by the way, never miss it."

"Well, I had a similar situation to Russell's," said Gus, "shooting a scene where pain was involved and obviously a performer can't actually *act* pain, so I asked Elena if we could inflict it on her and record it." The others raised their eyebrows.

"She signed a waiver, and we paid her a massive bonus," he implored, raising his hands, "dodgy ground, I know, but I wanted to try it as an experiment, because until now we've been overdubbing Feels from accident victims and cancer patients, and it can't be the same."

"That's nasty," said Russell, "but I get where you're coming from, because however good an actor is, they're not actually *feeling* the emotions, are they? They're acting, using previously felt emotions to create a facsimile."

Malcolm bit his fingernails and looked at the clock, as Gus continued,

"So what do you think about this: Traditionally, just like on Russell's show we use two Conduits for the two performers. So Aggy recorded Elena and Terry recorded Brutus, who went too far and really hurt Elena. And of course Aggy Felt the pain, and, er, I'd forgotten to warn her—"

"Or sign a waiver?" asked Malcolm.

"Don't worry, she's a banjo for fucksake," he saw their eyebrows raise, "sorry, Conduit. Anyway, Elena had faked a couple of orgasms during the shoot, so we needed her real Feels to overdub."

"And?"

"And so I told Aggy to actually go down on Elena herself while also recording, and it seemed to make the Feels even more powerful, it being just the two of them, not Aggy recording another performer making Elena come. And no acting, just real Feels."

"We should trademark that," suggested Russell, "Real Feels—."

"Real Feels," they all said in unison. Malcolm lit another cigar,

"Weirdly, I got a call from Franco at War & Gore earlier. He'd accidentally blown up a stuntman and recorded his Feels, so also needed legal advice."

Gus scratched his tummy, "There's a Collective Consciousness thing going on here."

"I don't think that's Collective Consciousness," said Russell, "it's events that are happening, not people having the same idea."

"So it's just coincidence?" asked Gus, disappointedly.

"No. What is the common denominator here?"

"The Conduits?"

Cherry was traumatized by the stuntman's death. It kept playing over and over in her head. The searing pain, the fear, and knowing he was about to die. She remembered there was a Circle starting on the roof of ninety-eight in half-an-hour.

She climbed the steps onto the roof and saw twenty of her own kind already sitting on their cushions on the hot roof. Shit! She'd forgotten her cushion. Luckily, the leader of this Circle, Petty from Costume Drama Three, had a spare. They hugged and Exchanged and Petty shied away in shock.

"Holy Shit girl!"

Cherry nodded and cringed.

"Let's get that out of you," said Petty, then to the group, "Cherry has something she needs to share, and we are gonna have to bear the burden, unfortunately."

The others could Feel something emanating from Cherry and weren't looking forward to it, but that was partly what the Circles were for. Cherry sat down and shut her eyes.

In the car, Zooey drove while Tiggy watched the dots on the phones. The two dots were converging faster than Zooey's car could make it to Sunset.

"They're going to be all over one another like freckles."

She called Russell:

"Hi, it's Tiggy."

"What's up Tiggy?"

"Tamsin and Tom are on their way to meet up, somewhere near Sunset and Main."

She saw the dots merge. She double-tapped and the screen zoomed in to the address:

"The Soundproof Motel? What's that?" She heard Russell ask the same question. A voice shouted,

"It's a standard no-tell motel, with a few extra frills."

"So they're not meeting for a soda or a milkshake," said Zooey.

"Don't let them screw! It'll ruin the whole plan!" implored Russell.

"Okay, we'll do our best. But what if we can't?"

"Then record them doing it!" the other voice shouted, "it's better than nothing!"

Tiggy turned to Zooey and asks, "Who was that?" then, "take a right."

Russell hung up then turned to Gus,

"I haven't heard the phrase 'Doing It' since I was seventeen."

"It's the title of my biography*."

*available at all ~~good~~ bookshops

Zooey parked at the Motel and Tiggy ran into Reception,

"Has a young couple just taken a room here?"

The man nodded without looking up from his game.

"What room please?"

He looked her up and down, then said,

"I'm not telling *you*."

"They're underage, you know."

He shrugged, pointing to the poster-sized Disclaimer on the wall.

She ran out and joined Zooey who was putting her head near the door of a downstairs room.

"Feel them?"

She shook her head.

"Keep trying. I'll do upstairs."

She was halfway along the second floor when she recognized their Feels. They were snogging. She knocked on the door, but they didn't react. She leant over the balcony and waved to Zooey who joined her. They knocked again, but there was no reaction.

"It's soundproof," said Zooey, "the clue was in the title."

Tiggy looked at the sky, "So we can't stop them, then let's record them. This is what Russell was building toward. Maybe it can be overdubbed later."

Zooey nodded, "It's kind of pervy, but it's what we're paid to do."

They focussed on their targets and were blasted back into the railings by the pure, raw Feels.

They sank to the floor, clinging to the rails, totally immersed in the intense Feels.

Gus held his hands up, framing the sky, then spread them as he said, "Real Feels."

"So what is your conundrum Gus?" asked Malcolm.

"I want to film Aggy doing it, going down on girls in a series of Lesbian Love Scenes."

"A Conduit?"

"Why not? She's beautiful. I can make her a star."

"But she's a Conduit? They're meant to be keeping a low profile."

"What about what Russell just said? Time to come clean? Tell everyone who they are and what they're capable of?"

"They get a hard enough time for being 'political asylum seekers from the enemy side'," Malcolm said through gritted teeth, "Joe Public would go genocidal on them if the truth got out."

"Well then, we could produce them just for the Unfeeling, couldn't we?"

Malcolm's eyebrows popped up and Russell nodded,

"Yeah, we were making Shandling's Castle for years before the Conduits, but then their talent made adding the Feels for the Unfeeling a no-brainer. But actually making content specifically for the Unfeeling makes even more sense, money-wise."

"Indeed, you might be onto something, the market is massive and growing every day," said Malcolm, pulling himself up, "but another point worth thinking about is, if Franco is recording 'Real Death, Gus is recording 'Real Pleasure' and 'Real Pain', and your show has just elevated to 'Real Love', what are the Unfeeling going to think about the actors who are just acting? Up until now they've lapped it up because they didn't know any better."

"Oh shit, I hadn't thought of that," said Russell, burying his head in his hands.

"No, it's fine," said Gus, "we just say we've updated the tech and are introducing it on certain characters first in a roll-out . . . "

Malcolm nodded slowly,

"This is very intriguing boys. Let me get the Cocktail Trolley and we can discuss this at length."

At the Soundproof Motel, five minutes and a flood of Feels later, the Conduits still hadn't moved when the receptionist approached.

"What the fuck are you doing?"

Neither answered, oblivious to their surroundings. Another two men approached from the other direction.

"Your kind is not welcome here. Get going!" But neither moved. The receptionist kicked Zoey but she hardly noticed as all her Feels were coming from a more powerful force. The three men laid into them both with their fists and boots, but they didn't fight back, just crumpled and gave way like rag-dolls.

"Fucking Banjos!" the men cried as they tried prizing their fingers off the railings, but the Conduits' grips were too strong.

Then they grabbed their legs and tried dragging them, while kicking them, until they'd expended all their energy and gave up. The Conduits, bent and bruised, still remained at their post.

The sun was going down over the ocean as the three executives were on their second cocktail. Malcolm was renowned for his mixing. He was shaving a lemon of its zest when he asked,

"So you felt this orgasm?"

"Absolutely, it was definitely different because Aggy was actually making Elena come."

"Different?"

"More authentic? Hell, I don't know, we only get a trickle of what the Conduits feel."

"Yeah, we need a proper comparison."

"What we need is someone who can emote and empathize like us, but also feel the Feels like a Conduit."

They all looked at one another then said:

"Nova."

At the Soundproof Motel, the couple inside were bathing in the afterglow when Tiggy opened her eyes. She saw the state of Zooey lying twisted next to her and then realized she was in the same state, and in pain. She had some broken bones. She nudged Zooey, who woke up.

"Shit," she said, "I think we should go to the hospital."

"We would get better treatment at the Studio and it's much nearer. Can you get up?"

"Just about."

Tiggy limped to the car, aided by Zooey, then they tried to work out how to drive. Zooey's foot could press the pedals, but her hands couldn't grip the wheel. They were practicing sharing the controls when the actors emerged from the room, faces still glued to one another. They walked across the car park and the Conduits could Feel them, even from that distance, the power of their love being so intense.

"Shit, we could've stayed in the car and recorded them in safety!"

Tiggy got out her phone.

"We can't drive - I'm gonna text Russell . . ."

The three executives were very excited:

"Let's try and get a meeting with Nova as soon as possible," suggested Russell.

"Definitely, but we should send her the hard copies for comparison in advance, yeah?"

"Good point," said Russell, looking at his phone, "sorry, got to cut this short; Zooey and Tiggy's in trouble at that Motel and I need to call an ambulance."

Tiggy and Zooey were examined at Earth Almighty's Infirmary by one of their own kind, who, of course, was able to diagnose their wounds without an examination.

"I didn't know any of us had taken up medicine?"

"Oh yeah," she said, preparing a cast for her leg, "a lot of professions are benefiting from our unique talents, not just the creative arts, though we're only allowed to treat our own kind.

Now, this may hurt. Focus on me."

Tiggy did so, blocking everything else out, as the doctor recalled playing with her new puppy in all its joyous wiggleness. But Tiggy still winced as the Doctor straightened her leg and attached the cast.

"You'll be able to take this off very soon. We're very quick healers."

Russell and Peezy stood outside, looking through the window.

"They're here to see us!" Tiggy says, "that's quite touching, isn't it Zooey?"

"They're here to record the love scene Tiggy,"

Sona emerged from the elevator and strode around the corridors, looking for Heidi and found her sleeping at her desk.

"Heidi?" Sona said, "Heidi?" He prodded her and she turned to him, "I've called a meeting of the Heads of Departments in the Coral room. Could you please print a dozen more hard copies of James, and maybe a dozen sixty-second 'greatest hits'? Him writing the part about the field of wheat maybe? And be ready to present in half-an-hour, okay?"

Heidi perked up,

"Me? Yes Sir!" she beamed that wide smile and nodded.

The Coral Room was filled with the Heads of Departments from Earth Almighty's many UK wings. They included: TV, Radio, Music and Outside Broadcast production; and the Heads of the Academies that populate every city in the country (and the world): Music; Film; Dance; Writing; and Art. Plus Marketing and IT, who were late.

Most of them had brought their Conduit assistants with them, except for Marketing who seemed drunk, and the IT guy, who was dressed as a Goth.

The beautiful oval table had hidden compartments in front of every other seat which opened revealing a touchpad and a Joystick. Sona unfolded his long limbs and stood to say,

"I love the response of Winston Churchill, during the second world war, when it was suggested he cut funding to the arts in order to support the war effort: "Then what would we be fighting for?" he asked, and we have been in a similar situation for the last decade against the Yellows and the Reds: Fighting for our Art, our freedom of expression."

"And from William Shakespeare to Paul McCartney, England seems to produce, per capita, an obscenely large proportion of the World's entire output, but we don't really know why. Is it them being an island nation, the ancient history, or the arrogant, entitled colonialism in their DNA? It doesn't matter, we just accept it and try harnessing it as best we can, especially the Music, which for me, is the most special artform of all, as it's instantly accessible to anyone, including the Unfeeling. They may not be elated or moved to tears without the added Feels, but they can still be moved to dance."

Many in the room nodded and smiled, including Heidi, who chuckled.

"But I believe everything we've developed for the Unfeeling has been turned on its head by this young lady's revelation. So here's Heidi to tell you all about it."

Heidi smiled and bowed slightly. While handing out the eggs, she gave them a brief synopsis of the night's events, describing her Feels when James had read his first poem,

"That's on the first egg at about two minutes in." The Heads excitedly grasped the Joystick in front of them while their Conduits picked up the eggs, placed their other hand on a touchpad and shut their eyes. Their normally passive faces became animated with emotion. Their Heads got a sample of the Feels, like watching a black and white TV through a kaleidoscope.

The IT guy and Marketing, both without Conduits, looked on enviously.

"Intense huh?" asked Sona.

"But this is only a taster," grinned Heidi, "because I also asked him if I could sit with him while he wrote a poem, and the result is from the eighth minute to the hour, but we've printed a sample for you on the second egg."

The Conduits grasped their shiny little objects and gasped, then they were smiling and laughing and sobbing and covering their faces and smiling again, all in a minute. The Heads were quite smitten too, even by their minimal taste.

"This is this boy's Process in action. We don't know if it's just him, though when I went outside to greet the applicants I could Feel him among the crowd, but we think it's worth flagging up."

The general consensus around the table was positive.

"It could just be him; or just poets. Their brains are certainly wired differently," said Jane Riggs, the Head of the Academies for Writing.

"How did you come up with this?" asked Mike Shaw, the Head of Outside Broadcasts. Heidi smiled sheepishly, "I felt touched by the Spirit." The Conduits looked surprised and whispered something to their Bosses, who nodded or shrugged.

"So what are you suggesting?"

"Well, we know you're using our kind to record the audience's *reactions* to your performers, so the Unfeeling will Feel what the crowd feels, but for instance, how about recording the Artist while they perform to the crowd? How do they Feel during it, and after, while the crowd are applauding?"

Mike nodded approvingly, as did the others,

"We could maybe split the Feels: Performer and Audience, like Left and Right stereo sound?"

"We can record them playing in class too," enthused Molly Betts, the Head of the Academies for Music, "recording the writing process, maybe even the jam sessions?" Arthur Smith, the Head of the Academies for Art joined in,

"I'm going to try recording my most gifted artists while they paint and draw and sculpt. It might be very soothing, meditational even."

"Or seething with anger, depending on the artist," joked Heidi, "but it would also be a great bonus for whoever among the Unfeeling bought the Art, wouldn't you say?" Arthur laughed and rocked in his chair,

"That is another brilliant idea young lady!"

Jane listened to her Conduit whispering in her ear and nodded,

"Even if our poetry student's creative process gleans only a tenth of James's Feels, it'll still be worth transmitting to the Unfeeling."

Everyone was positive, and inspired by the meeting.

"We're going to need a whole lot more Conduits, that's for sure!" said Sona as he stood and walked to the door.

As they filed out, the Heads thanked Heidi for her revelation. The Conduits bowed to her with reverence.

"I'm glad you could all come today," said Sona, leading them to the lifts, "we hope maybe a whole new genre has been invented today, for the Unfeeling." He turned to Heidi and smiled,

"Follow me please."

He strode to his office with her jogging along behind.

"Come in Heidi, I have something you might like."

She entered and Sona took the lid off a platter. Her eyes widened and she smiled then laughed.

"Bjorks!"

"Yes, your national fruit!" he said, handing one to her. It was about the size of a red pepper, and she held it in both hands and inhaled its fragrance. Her nostrils flared and her smile expanded across her pretty face. She looked up at him,

"Can I?" she asked, tapping the top of the shell. He nodded and she expertly cracked it open.

"I have them imported," he said, "I can't live without them."

He had noticed her a few times before, striding purposefully through the building, seemingly loving her work, her wide smile playing across her face. Then she'd brought James to him – the Jewel in the Crown of the London office.

The way she ate her Bjork was highly erotic, her lips enfolding each seed in a kissing motion, then a slight twist of the head as they were detached and were enveloped. He watched intently as her lips maneuvered the seed between her teeth then she bit down, the juice exploding in her mouth, making her throw her head back and purr. He also swallowed, but for a different reason. He wanted her. Which was wrong. But he wanted to pull her into his arms, envelop her and inhale her. She was bound to have freshly fragrant scent, but with an undertone of musk; a deep redolence of —

"What are you doing?"

She had stopped eating and was staring at him, just like he was at her. A drip fell down the corner of her adorable chin.

"Oh. Forgive me," he blustered, "I was miles away . . ." But she must have known what he'd been doing, because she would have Felt him lusting after her.

"I have to go - I have a two o'clock," he said as he, blushing, ran from the room. Heidi shrugged. She'd been too preoccupied Feeling the fruit from her homeland to have Felt Sona. It was just weird seeing him with his tongue hanging out. She took a few more nuts and stuffed them under her shirt. Then she went to call James.

Aggy went to visit her friends in the Infirmary. She walked in, saw them and burst into tears. Just momentarily, just a few tears on her cheeks but Tiggy and Zooey were shocked, by her depth of emotion. Tiggy, her arm in a sling, hugged her and said,

"Awwww Baby, it's okay, we're going to be fine. We got a bit bent is all. The casts are coming off very soon."

Aggy sat between their beds and held their hands,

"This is terrible! This place is terrible, and I can't take it anymore. Fucking sleazebags! Your beautiful faces."

They looked at each other over Aggy's head as they absorbed her Feels: her distress; her anger; her exasperation and her resignation. She kissed them both on the cheek and said goodbye.

Tiggy's cheek was hot. She could Feel Aggy's love, but also a deep despair.

"Where are you going?"

"Home, see you there, I hope."

"Home?"

But she was gone.

Aggy rode her motorbike to her bedsit on the wrong side of the valley. Apart from her friends, her Honda XL250 would be the thing she'd miss the most. When she'd arrived, she'd been such a scaredy-cat, she'd forced herself to do something brave. So she'd got the bike which had terrified her at first, but she'd quickly grown to love it. Maybe she could take it with her? There'd be plenty of room on the Liner, but then she'd run out of gas and have no way of replenishing it.

She padlocked it to the railings, then stroked its tank, before reluctantly leaving it behind. She was defeated. She'd been chewed up and spat out. She wanted her Mum.

Upstairs, she packed a bag, then walked down to the Mall a few blocks east. It was teaming with her own kind, exclusively. Someone proffered her a leaflet about unionization, which she accepted graciously and tucked into a pocket of her hoodie. She waved to a couple she knew then heard Peezy yelling "Roll up – Roll up!" There she was, hiring out the eggs in front of a set of little booths. A curtain opened and a satisfied customer emerged. A queue was starting to form. Peezy had a courage that she'd tried to emulate, but had never quite managed it.

She headed to the basement, past all the clothes, wig and eyelash shops, to the Cineplex. Posters advertising classic movies "Now with Added Feels!" lined the walls. She wandered through the wide, dimly-lit corridors looking for the door to a particular screen: the one with no number and nothing playing. Finally she found it and walked up the tunnel under the seating but went straight through to the door by the screen marked Exit.

She pulled it open and saw the sign on the other side of the door. It read "Orientation" in her own language. Then, before her, was the station platform, deserted but for a (very handsome) Conductor waving his flag. The long train started to move into the tunnel, so she climbed aboard, followed by the Conductor. He smiled and took off his cap and she recognized him. His lustrous grey hair and handlebar moustache were etched in her mind.

"Welcome young lady," said the Conductor, "are you coming out with us to greet an arrival?"

"No sir, I'm going home."

"Is someone sick? A family member?"

She Felt his alarm, his empathy.

"No, I just need to leave this place."

"We hardly ever have anyone leave here, normally it's due to illness or a death in the family, but it's nice to have your company on the trip to the airfield."

It was only then that she realized the train was empty of any other passengers.

"Come sit in my office, it's more comfortable."

"I remember you from when I arrived a few years ago," said Aggy, "you were very welcoming."

He bowed his head,

"Why thank you, I love my job. I love meeting new people."

"And, of course, you were the first person I Felt when I arrived. It was a revelation! I Felt your benevolence, your warmth, your happy-go-lucky nature and your humanity."

He took a deep breath and nodded his head, "I've never really thought about that. But it's quite overwhelming when I think of all your people that I've welcomed. Tens of thousands!"

"Maybe you were chosen for your sunny nature?"

"Funny you should say that, but a decade ago Nova herself, and her cute little daughter Betty, chose me out of a crowd at a football game."

"She'd obviously been searching for the perfect ambassador and there you were. Shame the rest of them didn't live up to you."

He shook his head, "I'm sorry."

They sat in silence while the train settled into a rhythm and they swayed in time, the occasional light in the tunnel flashing past the window.

"Hey, would you like to share a meal with me?" he asked, "I have some delicious foods for you to try."

"So I can focus on you and Feel you tasting the food? Sure."

He produced a lunchbox from a cupboard and opened it on the table.

"Here is my coffee break snack. It is one of my favourite foods with a very delicate taste," he said as he unwrapped a Cucumber Sandwich and gave her a quarter, "ready?" They both took a bite and Aggy Felt his tastebuds tingle with a subtle flavor she'd never experienced before.

"Good, huh?"

She nodded, "I never get much flavor from focussing. I've tried sitting next to people in restaurants but—"

"Ah," he said, "but now try another quarter, while we hold hands."

She did so, and the flavors flooded her mouth and her mind, and she smiled as she chewed.

"The next course will blow your socks off!"

On the other side of the world, James sat in his bedroom, in his parent's house in Clapham.

Outside his window, above the weeping willow tree, the stars clustered like the freckles on Jo's temples. He'd just received a text from her, outlining in short sentences, her thirst for revenge against the enemy, her need to fight, and kill. He shook his head. Is this what his life was going to be with her? Brief moments of ecstasy punctuated by long absences, peppered with brief, brutal, bloodthirsty texts. He stared out at the quiet street. A fox sauntered by eating KFC.

Another text from her arrived. It just said "Battle Stations - X"

"Tasting delicious food like this is almost enough to make me stay," Aggy said, as they nibbled Chicken Teriyaki taken from the sizzling pan sitting on his stove, "how did you know holding hands multiplied the intensity?"

"I live with one of your kind. We do this twice a day."

"How come we haven't heard about this?"

"It never occurred to us to tell anyone. I, obviously, have no one to tell, and Mitzy, my partner, doesn't do the Circles much, except for cultural events, but even then, she's not one to share."

Aggy's face lit up,

"Of course, that's why Elena's Feels were so much stronger."

"What?"

"Earlier, I was recording a person . . . er . . . going through an emotional experience, and for the first time, I was actually touching them. And it really was a hundred times stronger, just like with the food."

As the Conductor took another bite of chicken she did also,

"This would make a great restaurant in the Mall, my kind and yours' sitting together like we are, or maybe more could join hands and get the same Feels? Or just touch feet, leaving both hands free for eating, or—"

"My, my, and they say your kind aren't creative."

"Well, if I wasn't going home, I'd . . . er, I'm gonna email my friends about this, they'll love it!" She found her phone and wrote to her busted up friends, but decided to keep the Porny Orgasm thing to herself, mostly because she never wanted to speak of that event ever again.

"More chicken." the Conductor asked, as he took the pan off the stove.

The journey was long and there was no view to watch, so many subjects got covered:

The Beatles mainly, with the Conductor trying to explain to a confused Aggy, the evolution of pop music, starting with Jazz, then Elvis, then the Fab Four and winding through to the present day. Then movies, of which they both claimed to be buffs.

The Conductor's favorite movie was 'Twelve Angry Man' and he made a good stab of acting out and narrating the complete story.

Aggy's favourite movie was 'Amelie', which didn't need her explaining the story as he and his partner had seen it fifty times,

"And she's one of my kind, what does she do?"

"She runs a wig shop in the Mall we departed from, and we live above it—"

"She owns a shop? That's impressive."

"She doesn't own it unfortunately; your kind aren't allowed to own property or businesses."

"Another reason to leave this place," she said, hugging herself, "but I like the idea you live together - that gives me hope. I've never heard of such relationships before."

"Well, I am in quite a unique situation. Not many people know the truth about you, except maybe for the executives that you work directly under, so for a lowly conductor to be in on it, is quite extraordinary."

"And you've met Nova! That *is* extraordinary!"

"Yes, not many normal people have had the honor."

"What was she like?"

"She's very tall, simultaneously scary like a psycho killer *and* comforting like a cuddle from your Mum. I've never felt charisma like hers, and I've met Jack Nicholson!"

"I would like to have met her . . . "

They sat in silence for a moment, still holding hands.

"Shall we have dessert?"

James sat at his window looking at the dark sky; he was trying to think of a good word that rhymed with 'becalm' when a News Alert popped into his notifications: 'The HMS Baldock, a Naval transport ship carrying ten thousand troops has been sunk in the Atlantic. An accompanying Frigate, also damaged in the blanket bombardment says searching for survivors is 99% pointless.' His heart sank with the Baldock.

The train emerged from the dark tunnel into the blinding light of the desert, then came to a halt under an awning by the platform.

A few forklifts buzzed around the train, unloading containers.

"What's in those?" she asked.

"Art mainly, paintings, sculptures, product prototypes, and an entire wall with a Banksy sprayed on it."

"Is it coming home with me?"

"No, a Cargo ship's scheduled to land after your Liner has launched." He scanned the horizon.

"Perfect timing," said the Conductor, "it's coming in."

Aggy joined him at the window but could see nothing,

"Where?"

He pointed at a lone cumulonimbus cloud, its puffy top as tall as a mountain, its flat bottom scudding over a distant cliff. It floated majestically towards them until it enveloped the train. Through the vapor, Aggy could see the silhouette of the Liner hovering just off the sand.

The Conductor opened the train door and they both got out into the fog. A moist, heat enshrouded them. Aggy could Feel the Conductor's excitement and happiness and benevolence as he approached the Liner.

Doors opened, ramps unfolded, and the passengers started to exit. They were all just like her. He greeted each one and ushered them onto the platform. Aggy remembered her own arrival, the Conductor's warmth, them clustering together on the platform, touching Nova's face on the screen and instantly being able to understand English, Spanish and Mandarin. She welcomed her fellow pioneers in their mother tongue as they boarded the train. She focussed on one girl and Felt very little: Innocence; anticipation; positivity - an almost blank canvas, whereas the next girl seemed to Feel a lot from Aggy and looked surprised. It looped back to Aggy and she was aware of how much she'd absorbed since she arrived. But was there a tinge of her experiences in the Sex industry in there too? Urgh, how embarrassing! She comforted herself that this girl was too inexperienced to even understand what she'd just Felt, hopefully. Or, just as likely, she'd already been watching porn and took it in her stride. Maybe it was Aggy's emoting that surprised her?

Aggy took off her wig and handed it to the girl, who bowed and joined the back of the short queue for the train.

The Liner hovered, empty but for the pilot who waited patiently for her. She stood between them. Both welcoming in their own way. She was torn. Torn between the blandness of her own planet, with no seasons, no surprises, no creativity, no nothing; and the tumultuous Earth, where everything was extreme, everything was surprising, everything was emotional, everything was either creative or destructive.

James wept for Jo. The girl he'd pined for since they met in primary school. The inspiration for ninety-per-cent of his poetry. The girl who loved his creations, even though she admitted she didn't understand every metaphor or subtext. He sat up and stretched, squeezing the last sob from his body. Outside his window, though, the weeping continued. He looked out. Someone was lying amongst the Rhododendrons, balled up in the fetal position, sobbing.

"Heidi? Is that you?"

Heidi sat up.

"What are you doing here?"

"I just wanted to be near you James, I'm sorry, I'll go—"

"But you're all wet! It's raining and you're all wet!"

"I don't really feel the rain . . ."

He climbed out of his window, onto the veranda's roof, then stepped into the weeping willow and climbed down. Heidi wasn't crying anymore but he touched her face,

"You're freezing! Let's get inside and warm you up."

Heidi was stunned - his touch sent a bolt of grief colored lightning through her body. She could Feel him so much clearer. Why had she never done this before with other artists? Because they didn't want to be touched by her kind?

James asked,

"What's wrong?"

"I was upset for you."

"The Baldrock?" She nodded and he was reminded of his grief, and she started crying again and he pulled her to him, and they stood under the weeping willow in the rain hugging each other.

Aggy turned to the train and saw the dashing Conductor holding his flag. She ran to him and hugged him tightly. Then she kissed his cheek and said,

"Goodbye Sir."

He smiled and waved his flag,

"I prefer to say, 'Au revoir' - 'until we meet again'," and blew her a kiss as she ran up the ramp into the liner where she was greeted by the pilot, Mazzy.

"Hey, you coming home with me?" She was a lot older than Aggy, and from what Aggy could Feel, a lot happier too.

They hugged and Exchanged, swapping their life stories in a moment.

"Aw, I'm sorry Aggy."

Aggy cringed, realizing she should've masked herself before hugging,

"Thanks, but please don't share my story. I'm really embarrassed—"

“Of course I won’t, but you’re holding a lot of shame that seemingly isn’t even yours? There’s hundreds of nameless people crying in your head—”

“I know,” whimpered Aggy, “and I will deal with it in my own time, I promise.”

Mazzy gave her another hug then raised the last ramp..

The Liner was cavernous inside, and felt desperately empty. But the wood paneling gave her a comforting reminder of home.

Mazzy led her up to the cockpit which wasn't what Aggy had expected, (something out of Star Wars?). Instead it was like the cab of a truck - a bench seat looking out the windscreen, with lots of personal items on the dashboard and photos stuck to every available surface. But there was no steering wheel, instead a number of levers. One of which Mazzy adjusted, and the Liner floated slowly away from the station.

"Now, shall we have tea?"

They walked back downstairs and went to a cafeteria where they found tea all ready for them, made by Gerti who hugged her, but Aggy masked herself and no Exchange took place. Then they sat down and drank their tea while watching through the window as they scudded along the desert floor, before slowly ascending and the sky turned from blue to black. Aggy watched the blue planet slowly shrink in the inky blackness, and she felt relieved.

"I lived near a Spaceport when I was a kid and loved the way these enormous machines just floated into the sky. Then, when I was a grumpy teenager, I really wanted to fly away on one."

"Me too," said Mazzy, "and I do, twice a week," she sighed deeply, "but I also like to come home."

A bell rang.

"That's my cue," said Mazzy, as she stood, "excuse me. I have to fly this part manually as this Hopper is not visible to any computer."

Aggy nodded, not really understanding what she had said, or caring.

"Want to join me?"

Aggy followed Mazzy back up to her cab, then prepared to help her spot this 'invisible' structure.

"It's always hidden from Earth by their Moon," said Mazzy as she maneuvered the Liner past the big grey orb. Finally, they saw a golden ring hanging in space, and steered towards it. She had never seen a Hopper before but was impressed by its size. She was sitting on a Liner that was the size of a cathedral, but the closer they got to it, the more it dwarfed them. Mazzy started speeding the ship up, or was it the Hopper pulling them towards it? They were seemingly on a collision course but as Aggy thought they were about to hit it, they swooped through the hole and all the stars outside the windscreen disappeared and they seemed to be standing still. A gentle rocking motion was the only clue that they were traveling ten thousand times the speed of light.

James lay on his bed while Heidi warmed up in the bath. Her wig gently steamed on the radiator. He thought of Jo, drowned at sea, and his heart imploded.

He was weeping quietly when Heidi climbed onto the bed, lay down and hugged him. She stroked his hair, and his Feels flooded her body. His despair was total, and she wasn't sure she could handle it, taking her hand away. But maybe, if she persisted, she could absorb it? Kind of suck it out of him? Maybe make him recover quicker? She spooned him and Recorded the unbearable Feels until he fell asleep, and they reduced to a gnawing vacuum. She got up and

went to the bathroom where she knelt over the loo and Recalled his Feels, vomiting them into the bowl.

Franco Z, the director from the War & Gore department, drank his JD on rocks in the dark, corner booth of Sandy's on Sunset. A spare glass, the bottle of JD and an ice bucket sat before him. A very tall, brutish man wearing a cape entered the gloomy bar and joined Franco. Under his cape, the uniform of the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff could be glimpsed, his medals gleaming in the fairy lights strung above the booth.

He joined Franco and poured himself a drink. When his glass had been emptied, he asked,

"What's up?"

Franco knew to be precise,

"So, General Zoka sir, I accidentally killed a man on set the other day, and the Feels are recorded on this egg."

The General clutched the egg, shut his eyes and winced. But then looked impressed,

"That was horrifying!"

"I thought it might be."

"But so authentic. He died spectacularly, and I did get a tiny Echo from it."

Franco didn't know what that meant but didn't dare ask. Instead, he said,

"Do you think there's a market for this?"

"You want to make Snuff Feelies Franco?"

"No, but - well, maybe - but no, I thought we could do a different kind of Recruitment Film. Not shot on the Backlot, but actually on the frontline. A whole multi-camera production

focussing on certain interesting characters, following them through their training and posting and killing and dying, all the while capturing their real Feels—"

"Like a Reality Show, but actually real? Not scripted?" the General looked intrigued, "with the real Feels of Courage and Brotherhood and Bloodlust, but also Fear and Pain and Death!"

Franco nodded excitedly,

"Exactly! So it'd be a brilliant Recruitment Film for the kids, plus a weekly entertainment for the Unfeeling, meaning it'd pay for itself!"

General Zoka filled his glass again and took a long swig,

"I like it. A lot. I'm seeing Nova tomorrow, and I'll run it past her."

"Thank you."

"And maybe mention it to Dofa, my counterpart on the Reds, and Muga from the Yellows."

"Why would you do that?" asked Franco.

"Why? Because they have Earth Almighty and the Conduits there too, so they'll also want to use an innovative idea like this. Recruitment is all important when you're in the slaughter business."

The next day, Heidi awakened still hugging James who snored gently. Even though his Feels were unpleasant, she was loath to leave him. She stayed there, Recording the grief for as long as she could, then went to the bathroom to eject.

She got dressed, put on her wig, then crept downstairs. James's parents were nowhere to be felt. She wandered the house, loving the space and the sheer number of rooms. She made some toast and coffee and took it upstairs.

James was distraught, but seemed comforted by her presence. She could feel his grief, but maybe it wasn't so all-encompassing? Maybe her theory could work?

Once he was washed and dressed she suggested they go to Earth Almighty to continue the recording of his work,

"It'll be a distraction, hopefully?"

He agreed and they headed for the tube station.

"Are your parents rich James?"

"Not at all, why?"

"Because they live in such a luxurious house."

James cracked a smile for a moment,

"It's just an average suburban semi."

Heidi looked askance,

"I share a room smaller than your bedroom—"

"They're Boomers. Houses cost twenty-five quid when they were our age."

Chapter Three

A small wooden chest sat behind Legal's reception desk. It was made of walnut, with gold leaf highlights and had a post-it attached with one word written on it: "Nova".

A despatch rider arrived, greeted the smoking receptionist and pointed at the chest. He was surprised by its weight. Lugging it back to his bike, he bungeed it to his pillion seat, then started his bike and meandered between the people pushing rails of costumes, carrying massive (but lightweight) props, driving golf carts and wrangling camels, to Gate G.

He had to wait for the guards to clear a space for him though the protesting lawyers and bankers, but finally he turned on to the main drag and was speeding up the hill. Then he was scraping his footpegs on the tight corners that snaked up the mountain road to the Studio Boss's home.

Finally, at the end of North Beachwood Drive, he stopped at the gate and Security took the chest and carried it up the long, palm-lined drive to the house, where it was transferred to a Cocktail Trolley pushed by the steady hands of the beautiful, bewigged, Betty.

She could Feel something emanating from within the chest. Something beautiful. It made her smile as she rolled it towards the terrace.

Betty knew better than to interrupt her mistress when she was staring out across the City and the Ocean beyond, so she stopped the trolley a meter from her and was about to leave when Nova turned,

"That's it, isn't it! Bring it Betty,"

Nova stared at the box before her, then slowly laid her hands on it and smiled,

"You Feel it?"

Betty could Feel it. Standing next to Nova, they made an incongruous pair, Betty five feet on tip toes, Nova six foot, four while stooping. She opened the lid. Inside were the eggs nestling in their indents. She went to pluck one and her fingers danced over the choices.

"We should try the Controls first, shouldn't we?" suggested Betty, "the acted Feels, yes? For comparison?"

Nova rolled her eyes, but agreed, so they both grasped the ones included for the Control Experiment.

"Meh," they both said in unison, and dropped them.

"Next is the kids' first kiss on Russell's Shandling's Castle," said Betty, as they both took an egg, and were immediately overcome:

"Oooh, that's amazing! Is that what it really Feels like?" asked Betty.

"True Love?" Nova mused, fanning her sweaty forehead, "well, it's been awhile, but yes; though I don't know if I've ever felt it so intensely? Apparently Russell has coined the phrase Real Feels for them." They both smiled approvingly.

Nova held the egg aloft, turning it in her fingers, allowing the light to dance across its mirrored surface,

"You know I invented the eggs Betty?"

"Yessss." Betty gritted her teeth.

"It was during the whole development phase, remember?"

"Uh-huh."

"When we were trying to extract the Feels you'd Recorded?"

"How could I forget?" winced Betty.

"When we were still in the analogue stage, and I suggested using the element, what's-it-called, do you remember?"

"Torturonium?" suggested Betty, "no wait, it was PerformingSealenium, or Pantomimeium?"

"Don't try to be funny."

"Next, is their first time," giggled Betty, "apparently we should fast forward to ten minutes, fifteen seconds for the really good bit? Ready? Go." They both closed their eyes and melted into the sofa, smiling and laughing and squealing and coming as the scene played out. When it was over, they lay back and snoozed.

Russell sat on the bleachers with his beautiful wife, Jen. She was way out of his league, but seemed strangely attracted to very hairy men, and he was the very hairiest of them all. Also they'd made each other laugh, and she liked spending his money; money that he didn't have time to spend himself.

They were supposed to be watching their kid's Little League game, as promised, but Jen was on her phone, as was he, typing his thoughts on the extra planning needed if Real Feels got the go-ahead on Shandling's Castle. He couldn't recast Beatrice and Tom's parents just because they weren't in love in real life. Maybe overdubs? Advertise for older couples who really are in love? Whose love is now slow-burning, not red hot?

Applause woke them from their reverie and their boy was looking to them for validation. They clapped and smiled and whooped. Then went back to their phones.

But how would you word that casting call? How would the Conduits analyze the couples? And how would they record the correct emotions from them? He needed to consult Tiggy and

Zooey on this. He fired off a text, asking to meet them later. He'd have to come up with an excuse to tell Jen. She knew Conduits worked at the Studio but not what they actually did. He was tired of lying to her; even of lying through omission. He wanted to share everything with her, just like before the Conduits came along, but there was definitely a barrier between them now, and it was bigger than their phone addiction.

A notification buzzed and he saw that Zooey had replied with a thumbs up.

Nova and Betty were eating ice-cream (as a palette cleanser) while staring out across the valley.

"What's next?"

"Two Feels from the Porno Department. The Control eggs with a normal orgasm, recorded by a Conduit nearby; then the Supposedly Superior Orgasm which was recorded by a Conduit actually going down on the girl!"

Nova was intrigued, "interesting."

"Shall we try them?" Betty asked, "then we'll have cigars."

They grasped the first eggs and activated them. What started as a low hum slowly grew into a full-body rush, exceeding their expectations. If either of them had had hair, it would've been standing on end.

But the second one truly blew them away. Betty was dumbstruck, her eyes on stalks, like a cartoon Coyote. Nova just purred.

"So what's makes it so much more powerful?" asked Betty, "is it because it was a Conduit who induced it?"

"Could be," agreed Nova, "Another first? What's going on? and we've got the Anniversary Drinks later and Sona's coming with more big news."

Aggy watched from her window in the Liner as her home planet grew before her. It was a uniform orange colour except at the poles where there were mountain ranges, their peaks covered by clouds. The sight excited her as she thought of seeing her Mum for the first time in years.

The descent was steady and gentle, unlike all the films she'd watched on Earth of their violent and fiery re-entries into the atmosphere. Silently, it came to a halt a meter off the ground, and the ramps descended. The weather was just as she left it - balmy. She said goodbye to Mazzy and Gertie, promising to call them, then walked across the landing area, past other massive liners and cargo ships, towards the new (to her) Liner-shaped terminal, a glass and steel structure like the airports she'd used on Earth, with Departures shown on a big screen:

Tokyo - 8:79

Los Angeles - 8:95

Moscow - 10:00

London - 00.80

Many of her own kind stood transfixed by the screens, waiting for the Boarding Light, and the beginning of their big adventure. They were all young and quiet, preferring to use their telepathic talents to communicate, or were maybe plugged into their shows.

But some were going retro, wearing their mum's Walkman, and actually using their ears. Judging from the T-shirts, the Beatles still seemed to be the most popular band, but Harry Styles was a close second.

The Departures screen also played an orientation video, outlining the opportunities available to the pioneers, and most importantly:

"Remember to keep our secret - the Humans on Earth have no idea there is life outside their Star system. They are simple folk, busy Creating and Copulating: happy to accept that our kind are from the other side of their own planet. More details to come on your flight."

No mention of the war or the suicide bombers then? or the racism? or the exploitation?

While she watched for the plume of steam above the forest, heralding the approach of her train, she gazed at the massive cargo ships as they were loaded with billions of Bjorks, the Planet's only other export; a nut picked from the trees that covered 90% of the land. One of the giant ships floated into the air, so smoothly and silently, but everyone still went, "ooooh."

She had been trying to keep her emotions under wraps, not wanting to scare anyone, but she was tired and couldn't help occasionally emoting. Her excitement at seeing her Mum made everyone turn and look around; a burst of anger at Gus and everyone ducked for cover. A youth sitting close to Aggy realized it's her,

"What are you doing? What is that?"

"I'm sorry, I, er, am just feeling, I guess?"

"Like on Earth? The humans?"

"Yeah, I seem to have picked up a bit through ingesting so much of—"

"Do it again!" she squealed, "do the first one, the one that was sparkly!"

Aggy conjured up her Mum's face and said,

"Yeah, I'm about to see my Mum for the first time in three years and I can't wait and I'm just so excited and—"

All around her, they were smitten, overwhelmed by the Feels they were receiving. She laughed then they all joined in, then clustered around her.

The girl was amazed,

"It's so much more intense in person, than when I'm plugged in to my shows. My elder sister said it was like that on Earth, which made me want to follow her even more!"

Aggy didn't want to say anything negative. She smiled and nodded, then, inspired by the Conductor, said,

"Then try holding my hand while I think of my Mum." She did so, then someone held her hand, and another, and another, until there was a snake of young girls coiling around them. She imagined her Mum in the Grove playing Hide and Seek when she was six. Aggy finding her behind a tree and her Mum throwing her in the air. The excitement, the joy, the love. Everyone gasped, some laughed, some sighed, some fell over.

The Anniversary Drinks on Nova's sprawling deck was a casual affair; just twenty-five close friends round for cocktails and a buffet. The fact that these friends were all at least six-and-a-half feet tall and looked like supermodels was incidental. That they had come from every corner of the Earth, might not seem casual, unless you knew it only took them a moment to do so. The guests each ran a wing of Earth Almighty's global operation, or worked high in Government and the Armed Forces. Collectively they called themselves the Taller. They mingled easily as old friends did, chatting about their homes and cars, reminiscing about old times and faraway places.

Sona, from London, raised his long arms and clapped once. Everyone turned to him and smiled.

"Ladies and Gentlemen, we are here to celebrate the Universe's greatest discovery. It was exactly twenty years ago, when Nova swung through this backwater galaxy and heard a transmission coming from this little blue planet. It was something that she'd never heard before. Though it made no sense to her, it touched her heart, and she was intrigued enough to halt her cruiser while she tried to decipher the message. But it wasn't a Despair Flare, or a Freakin Beacon, it was of course 'Yesterday' by the Beatles! The first *music* heard by any race outside of Human. These little Creators, who have enriched our lives a thousand-fold, have no peers in the Universe.

"Today I can reveal we've hit a new milestone: One thousand trillion Sentients are streaming The Beatles right now, followed closely by Taylor Swift, Harry Styles, and King Crimson.

"And since the Conduits were discovered twelve years ago, and we added the Unfeeling to our audience, I can report today that three trillion of them are plugging in everyday to Feel Shandling's Castle!"

Everyone applauded and clinked their glasses.

"Plus, all our ever-growing catalogue of content! And it's all thanks to our host, the brave and beautiful Nova!"

Everyone turned to Nova and cheered.

"Dear Friends," called Nova, "welcome! Those stats are incredible, aren't they? But something else happened this week, which I hope isn't an exaggeration to say, is as important as the discovery of the Conduits, which Sona neglected to take credit for."

Everyone turned back to Sona, who said,

"No really, it's my Bjork Nut addiction that should take the credit!"

After the laughter died down, Nova opened a box containing more little chrome eggs,

"These have been dubbed 'Real Feels' by Russell, the director of Shandling's Castle,"

There was applause for Russell and the great soap, "as an experiment, he conspired to manipulate the two teens into really falling in love, to make their performances more compelling. Well, he succeeded! and their Real Feels have been captured for your pleasure. Take one of these compilations to Feel. Lie on a lounge, float in the pool, or if you want privacy go to a bedroom and see what you think. Personally, I've never felt anything like it."

Aggy walked out of the modern glass Spaceport into the wooden-built Train Station. A steam train was being loaded with wood for its next journey into the country. She jumped aboard the empty train and chose a seat by a window. Most of the carriages were devoted to sleeping compartments as some the young pioneers may have to travel as much as three thousand kilometers to get to this Spaceport; one of only twelve on the planet. As far as Aggy's journey home went, she counted herself lucky that she lived only one stop away.

As the train pulled out of the station, away from the glass and metal and into the trees, Aggy could feel the welcoming of the Spirit.

The Taller were all in agreement. It *was* True Love, it *was* amazing, and it *will be* a game-changer,

"But if we decide to go ahead, once these are released there's no going back. Once they Feel 'True Love', the Unfeeling won't accept anything less."

"Something for us all to consider," said Nova.

"What does Russell think?"

"Shall we get him over here?"

They all wanted to meet Russell, so he was summoned. A buzz of excitement encircled the Taller.

They all had questions for the man who created their favourite soap.

Russell found the Diner and saw them sitting in the window. The bruises on their faces were almost gone, but Tiggy still had a cast on her wrist, and Zooey had one on her foot.

They were happy to see him and accepted his repeated apology with grace.

Zooey was scooping Rocky Road with one hand and holding a raw Weetabix in the other. Tiggy ate a block of Stilton.

They invited him to sit, then they chatted about Shandling's Castle.

"So what's the verdict on the Real Feels?"

"Nova has Felt them, and loved them. She asked us to print a bunch for her board which is in session now, so they'll decide soon I hope. In a way it'd be easier if she just said no. My problem, if she says yes, is where to get the Real Feels for the other "not in love in real life" couples in the show?"

"You want actor couples, or just couples who are in love?"

"Actors ideally. Maybe. I don't know," pondered Russell, "but how would we audition them? Devise a series of questions—"

"We'd have to do it. Feel them out."

"Yeah," agreed Tiggy, "otherwise you'd get people pretending, just to get the gig."

"So you'd be able to tell immediately?"

"Absolutely. Without any questions."

Russell smiled. He liked the simplicity,

"Do them," he said, pointing to an old couple sharing a pancake.

"He loves her dearly, and has done so for fifty years," said Tiggy.

"She can't stand the sight of him, and has done so for fifty years," said Zooey.

Russell laughed. This was going to be easier than he thought.

His phone vibrated. It was a text from the 'Desk of Nova', summoning him to drinks.

"Hey," he said, getting up, "want to meet the Big Boss?"

"But there's more!" cried Nova, "Sona has news for us."

Sona took center stage and told them of the discovery of the Poet and his radiating emotions while reading his own work; then he described when the Poet wrote, the revelation of the tumultuous torrent that he'd projected.

Sona asked them to sit, then handed out hard copies. The reaction was no different from before. They all Felt the tumultuous torrent and ended up wet and ragged, limp on their loungers.

"I spoke with all my Heads of Departments, and we realized we'd been concentrating on the Feels of the audience, not on the performers, so they're conducting experiments as we speak, finding if other Artists also exude these Feels while they create."

Nova summoned an assistant,

"Go get me a Poet please."

The assistant looked skeptical,

"Will a Rapper do?"

Gotton, from Moscow, asked,

"Did you think of this Sona?"

"I wish I felt that kind of inspiration, but no, I didn't. In fact it was a Conduit."

The Taller exuded a collective disbelief, "Conduits aren't creative. Only Humans are."

"But this one has inspirations. She thought of recording this Poet while he wrote, and she imagined the possibilities of expanding the process to others."

The Taller were skeptical.

"Would you like to meet her?"

Heidi had been reclining in an easy chair all day and night, resting her hand on the Mixing Desk's Touchpad as she recorded James's Feels live. To a casual observer, he had been staring out the window most of the time, chewing on a biro, but Heidi knew differently, his thoughts and emotions were on another level from most people, and were astounding in their complexity.

"It's too late to go home, isn't it?" he asked, "I think I might just crash out on this sofa for an hour. Okay?" Heidi nodded. She could've just closed her eyes too, but then she Felt her co-worker, Sandy calling her. She covered James with a blanket then went to find her.

"Sona needs you to meet some people."

Heidi nodded and followed the girl to Sona's office, but he was alone and asleep, reclining in his armchair.

"Sit on the sofa, and hold this scroll," said Sandy. It was surprisingly heavy for a tube the size of her forearm. But it really did look like a scroll from ancient times,

“What are these numbers in the dials?”

“They’re the co-ordinates of where you’re going in the Hollywood Hills.”

Heidi noticed Sona was cradling a similar gadget in his arms. She cradled hers in the same way then sat down and shut her eyes.

Heidi awoke in a closet of some kind. She opened the door and emerged into a warehouse sized living room. At the far end she could see a gathering outside, so she headed that way.

"Welcome! You can leave your scroll here, with the others," said one of her kind, "is this your first time using the device?"

Heidi nodded, a little disoriented.

"Well, it's just like you're really here. You can sit in chairs and hold things normally, even eat and drink. It's just organic matter that you can't touch." She held out her hand and Heidi tried to grasp it, but passed right through.

"Ooh!" she said, "that was odd!"

"Go join the others outside. Sona is waiting for you."

Sona saw the girl walking onto the deck and his heart missed a beat. He hadn't spoken to her since the Bjork incident and felt embarrassed.

"This is Heidi. Our little genius from London."

Everyone smiled and clapped. Heidi found these peoples' height and beauty quite intimidating but happily answered questions about what had happened. Then the tallest, most beautiful woman in blue approached, and Heidi was afraid. Nova asked the awkward question that she hadn't been looking forward to, of what inspired her to ask to sit with him?

She hesitated: The truth? Desire, or,

"It felt like it was suggested to me? By the Spirit?"

"The spirit?"

"At home, our planet is covered in Trees and their roots make a network through which everyone can communicate. That's why we have no leader or government. Together, we make decisions. That is called the Consensus, which, along with our Ancestors and the Planet itself, make up the Spirit."

"The hive-mind of the Conduits," said Morga from Seoul.

"I like the term hive-mind," she laughed, "but we don't actually call ourselves Conduits, you know that, Right?"

Her cheek surprised them. They stared at her. Sona broke the silence with a chuckle,

"I told you she was different, didn't I?"

Finally, they chuckled too, then continued to grill her:

"So what do you call your race?"

"Er, like you call yourself the Taller? I don't think our kind actually have one?"

Gotton repeated her phrase,

"Our kind?"

Heidi nodded to him, then he said,

"your Kind, with a capital 'K'."

Everyone looked at him,

"You are Kind – I can Feel it."

Heidi smiled and thanked him, as he continued,

“So, if it’s not (he air-quoted) ‘politically correct’ to call you Conduits, I dub thee, the Kind.”

Everyone liked that, including Heidi.

Mona from Delhi asked if she has any of the Poet’s Feels on her.

"In fact, I just left him, so they'll still be fresh. He's been grieving his girlfriend who died yesterday on the Baldrock, but there's some really hopeful Feels he's been using in his poetry today."

She Recalled it, and they all recoiled from the blast; their cheeks blushing.

Aggy walked home along the riverbank, between the golden-brown trees. Each one grew exactly twenty meters apart and its thick, twisty branches were easily climbable for picking the Bjorks. She saw a group performing the 'Ceremony of Thanks' around a darker Tree, which must’ve been retiring, its one thousand years of 'fruitfulness' coming to the end. It would be lovingly converted into a new house, shop or cafe using the extraneous branches to build floors and walls, and the rest would be used for fuel.

There was no deviation from this millennial schedule, similar to so much of life on this world. For instance, at this time of the evening she knew her Mum would be at Arbor, communing with the Consensus. She saw it ahead, a spiraling wooden structure grown from the adjacent Trees' roots, atop a substantial barrow.

She climbed the incline to the Arbor but didn't go in, as they would be mid-meditation, so she sat on a bench to wait.

She took a deep, cleansing breath and looked out over the silent sea of Trees that always resembled the best day of autumn on Earth.

Other than the Spaceport's glass tower, refracting a prism of colors across the sky, the land was uniform in all directions: Trees, Trees, Trees, with the barrows, protruding at regular intervals, most hosting an Arbor, School or Community hall, sitting in between the diamond lattice-work of rivers.

Nova and Betty watched the Taller cluster around Heidi.

"They all seem very taken with her," Betty said, "especially Sona."

"Really?" frowned Nova, "you suspect? or are you picking that up?"

"Oh, I can Feel it."

"Really? Sona, one of the Taller falling for a Conduit? That would be another first!"

"Well, she is very attractive and is obviously developing some unique talents."

"True."

"But it's not the first time Sona has crushed on a Conduit."

"Really?"

"But unfortunately, she is falling for the Poet."

"Really?"

"You're saying 'Really' far too much."

"Really?" said Nova, winking, "but what's your take on her? Developing her talents, and ideas, and a crush on a Human?"

"Well, she'd clearly a new breed, isn't she? Not the subservient sort you're so used to . . ."

Betty examined her face for a reaction, but Nova showed none.

"And weirdly, I seem to be experiencing envy."

"You?"

"Well yes," sighed Betty, "these girls who are recording Humans all the time seem to be retaining the emotions, and I want some of that, like the early days? I had the whole gamut then, but as I got cooped up here with you, they've dwindled somewhat."

Nova looked like she was not appreciating being judged. But there was no outburst of anger. Of course not; not in front of her own kind. Betty changed the subject:

"I heard one actually got so angry, she went home! Can you imagine?"

"Do you know any more about her?"

"Apparently, she worked for Gus at the One-One-Six, so she was probably recording disgusting Feels all day."

"Like the Feels we were humming and coming over earlier?"

"Maybe less euphoric?"

"No wonder then. But let's get Gus over here to find out exactly what happened." Nova waved to her assistant.

Heidi found herself alone looking at the view, but only for a moment:

"I want to meet him," said Gordo from San Paolo, "please. Just to Feel him in person."

"He's asleep now," replied Heidi.

"All the better. If we get a good dream."

Heidi was skeptical but Gordo pleaded with her, and they went inside to find their scrolls.

As the sun began to fall behind the Trees, Aggy's Mum (Alli) emerged from the Arbor. She ran over and hugged her daughter.

"Agnëta," she purred, "I Felt you from inside. How lovely to see you." They Exchanged, standing silently in each other's arms while their friends and neighbours circled them. Milli cocked her head and Aggy was warmed by her Welcome, then Tolli did the same and Aggy absorbed a hum of Peace, then another of Comfort and another as the rest of the congregation slowly joined in.

Aggy, afraid the congregation would judge her, suppressed her new-found emotions. But was she being paranoid? Had she picked up more Human traits that had no place here?

Heidi opened her eyes. She was back in Sona's office. Gordo sat beside her. They walked to the Recording Studio and looked through the porthole. There was James lying on the sofa. Gordo quietly pushed the door open and crouched to enter. He didn't straighten up, but got on his knees and watched the boy breathe. Then he hovered his hand near the boy's heart and smiled. He certainly was a generator. Heidi watched from the door, but then Felt people behind her. The Taller, plus Betty, were creeping along the corridor. Unbeknownst to her, they had overheard her and Gordo's conversation and followed them.

Heidi held the door open for them, and they tiptoed in behind Gordo. Respectfully, they added their hovering hands close to the boy and smiled excitedly. Betty was blown away, being more sensitive than the Taller. She beckoned for Heidi to join them.

James was having his normal kind of dream. Weird. Surreal. He was on the sofa at Earth Almighty and he was being examined by many strange people towering over him, all smiling.

Heidi was there, also smiling. She put her hand over his eyes and all was dark, then the dream changed to another weird scene.

Torches were lit and the congregation dispersed into the woods. Aggy, her Mum and a group of neighbours headed down a path in the direction of their homes. Everyone was content, looking forward to their beds, while collectively humming the chorus of 'Hey Jude'. "Laaaaaa-Laa-Laa-La-La-La-La La-La-La-La Hey Jude!" "Laaaaaa-Laa-Laa-La-La-La-La La-La-La-La Hey Jude!" Aggy was less content: Shadows hid from the torches' flames in the canopy of branches. She watched for danger, but in her heart, she knew there was none. It's Earth where the dangers crouched in the shadows.

She realized it might take her a while to acclimatize to the Calm, the Comfort, the Consensus, and let it subsume her.

Her world reminded her of something David Bowie said on the Charlie Rose Show:

"I think the saner and rational approach to life is to survive steadfastly and create a protective home and create a warm loving environment for one's family and get food for them. That's about it. Anything else is extra. All culture is extra. It's unnecessary and it's a sign of the irrational part of man. We should just be content with picking nuts."

Yes, she would take this sane approach. She would find a partner, create a loving environment for their family, and be content picking nuts.

Aggy and her Mum waved goodbye to the last of their neighbours and walked together up the path to the house, hand in hand. With no light pollution, their galaxy shone brightly in the sky, the spirals coiling from horizon to horizon. The goats heard their approach and came to greet

their long-lost sister; the younger ones bleating and nuzzling her, while the elders nodded or gave her a wink.

Finally, Aggy was permitted to climb into the house, built within a retired tree, and she sat at the kitchen table while her Mum made Sleepy Time tea. But Aggy didn't need any help sleeping - the journey home across half the universe had exhausted her.

Aggy's room was just as she left it. She fell on her bed, still in her hoodie. Her Mum tucked her in and wished her pleasant dreams, but she was already asleep.

Sona ushered everyone out of the Edit Suite and led them back to his office. One by one they picked up their scrolls and disappeared. Sona and Heidi were alone.

"Come back with me Heidi please?"

"I should really stay with James. He may wake up—"

"Heidi, I've got big plans for you. You need to come with me. James will be here when we've finished. Please?"

Heidi shook her head,

"I'm sorry sir, but I can't leave him. I love him."

"You *love* him?"

"I do, I'm really feeling it."

"But he's grieving for another—"

"Not so much anymore - I've been 'extracting' it?"

"Extracting?"

"I can't think of a better word? I'm doing something more than just *Recording* it; I'm actually taking it out of him."

"Is this a new talent?" asked Sona.

"It's something our Kind can do for one another, to 'share the burden', if you will, so I thought I'd try it in another context."

"I told them you were extraordinary."

She nodded and disappeared from his view.

He'd wanted to say: '*Because you don't want him to feel so bad? or because you want him to fall in love with you?*' but had realized, just in time, that it would have been petty.

He shrugged, then sat back in his armchair, picked up his scroll and shut his eyes.

The Anniversary party continued: A rapper was performing while Nova and Betty rated his Feels. He was very talented and exuded a charm that the Unfeeling would appreciate, but he didn't live up to James's output of energy and full spectrum of emotions.

Betty was intrigued by more new arrivals that Nova went to greet. One of the Taller was the President's Chief of Staff and another was a hulking General by the name of Zoka. But they all fell silent when they Felt a charismatic Human approaching:

When Russell walked out onto the terrace, the Taller burst into rapturous applause and bowed their heads. Tiggy and Zooey, who had been walking with him, reversed back into the shade, but Russell reassured them it was okay. He took their hands and walked out again. Tiggy had never held Russell's hand before and was overcome by the nuclear-powered creativity exploding within him. She looked over at Zooey whose eyes were rolling in their sockets. They

tried to disconnect, to defocus, but touching made it impossible. Russell was almost holding them up, as around them, the Taller were peering down, smiling and asking a million questions simultaneously. For what seemed like forever, he answered each in turn with good grace.

Tiggy projected a thought to Zooey: "He seems unfazed by these people's reverence for him."

"It's born of his confidence in his talent and abilities," answered Zooey, "can you Feel it?" she asked and Tiggy nodded, "focus on that part. Absorb his confidence."

They both did so, and immediately inflated, no longer needing Russell to prop them up.

"This is Tiggy and Zooey. My most talented Conduits."

Nova and Tiggy shook hands and Nova was shocked by the power and the confidence within this little Conduit, like nothing she'd Felt before, not even in Betty.

Tiggy Felt the same, totally overwhelmed, but as long as she was holding Russell's hand everything seemed okay.

Russell said, "These two work with the Star-Crossed Lovers and got those Feels for you," everyone clapped, and he continued in a stronger tone, "on my orders they followed them to a Motel to record them making love, but were badly beaten up by some racists."

The Taller looked at the Conduits with the casts on their limbs and went 'Aww', as though a kid had dropped her iced-lolly.

"I feel bad for putting them in that situation for my Art, but don't you agree it's the way we built our new society which is at fault?"

The Taller turned away from Russell and greeted new arrivals.

"I see," said Russell, "you revere the Artist above everything, *except* profit!"

Disgusted, he said goodbye to Tiggy and Zooey, who seemed to be brimming with confidence and had asked to stay, then he walked to his car while speed-dialling his wife,

"Hey Jen, I need to speak to you about something."

Tiggy and Zooey sat in the shade of an enormous umbrella plant, trying various cocktails. They'd received Aggy's email about the benefits of touching and had enlisted some barmen to drink along with them while they all held hands. Out of the few they'd tried the Brandy Alexander was their favourite so far. They were also playing their game of focussing on people for the Feels, but the Taller didn't emit much, so instead, they were focussing on their conversations. In the far corner of the balcony, Nova stood with General Zoka, who was saying,

"Yeah, it fucking needs some promotion. Recruitment is down. I'm not gonna meet my quota."

Nova shook her head,

"That is unacceptable. We need five thousand culled daily. Escalate the advance, and get them to do the same, or do I have to call the Reds myself?"

Zoka seemed to shrink,

"No Ma'am, but we need more troops. We need to up our game in recruiting the cannon-fodder."

"So you like this idea of Franco's? What was it? Taking film crews onto the Battlefield to make a Reality Show?"

"Yeah! Filming real heroes in action; it'll be really inspiring for the bloodthirsty kids—"

"It'll cost a fortune."

"Not if we take Conduits too. Then we can sell the whole thing to the Unfeeling at a serious profit!"

They watched Nova's face light up for a moment, then she scowled,

"--, you idiot, we can-- send Conduits to the frontline! They can s-- t-- Echoes a-d would see wh-- the H-rvest-rs were doing . . . "

Betty had moved between them and the Taller, blocking the signal.

"It's rude to spy on people."

"They're talking about taking our Kind to war," hissed Tiggy, "for a reality show! I'm going over there and—"

"No. It wouldn't end well for you," Betty physically stopped Tiggy from standing and she could Feel a calming comfort coming through Betty's touch,

"I won't let it happen, I promise."

Zooey said,

"and what are Echoes? Nova mentioned we could – er, something – the Echoes"

Betty shrugged,

"It's a purple light she bathes in, in a chamber? All the Taller have them apparently—"

"Are they lovers?" Tiggy enquired.

"Who?" said Betty, looking around.

"Nova and the other girl she's talking to now?"

"Nova and Magga?"

"Yeah, they're constantly touching one another."

"Like you and Zooey?" Betty said, "no, but they're the only ones here who can touch, as they're both here in person. The other Taller are all here on their scrolls."

Tiggy nodded like she knew what Betty was talking about, but she didn't and was too drunk to bother to enquire further.

The three Conduits looked around. They Felt a new Human dynamo approaching. They looked over the balcony and saw a car driving up to the gate. After a brief pause at security, it continued towards them. A red corvette with the top down slowly revealed a balding man with a pony-tail. A glamorous blonde sat beside him.

"Gus," said Betty. Tiggy and Zooey both Felt her disgust, mixed weirdly with a little excitement.

The Taller Felt it next, as Gus entered the building. They hurried inside to applaud him, then followed in his wake as he strode onto the terrace with Elena on his arm. They almost worshipped this smelly little man. His department had made them more money than most of the others combined, and he had just provided them with the best orgasm they'd ever experienced.

"How did you think of it Sir?" asked Forko from Sydney.

"What can I say? Pure genius, I guess? It just came to me - why not get a Conduit to go down on the girl? Cut out the middleman?"

Nova joined the throng,

"Is this the girl?"

"Yes, this is Elena." They bowed to her, and she giggled, while whispering to Gus,

"What's a Conduit?"

"Er, the doctor who visited you in your dressing room Sweetheart," he hissed then patted her ass, "could you get us an iced bottle of Krug and six glasses?" and pushed her away.

"And where is the Conduit?" asked Nova, "the one you said had a unique gift?"

"Aggy?" flustered Gus, "ah, that, I do not know. I think it's her day off?"

"We wanted to meet *both* the players in your production Gus, you said she was the best, did you not?"

"Well, maybe I was exaggerating for effect," he shrugged, "most Conduits are much of a muchness—"

"Much of a muchness?"

"Aggy?" said Zooey, "he did say Aggy right?" Tiggy nodded, "She really did go 'Home', didn't she."

Gus changed the subject:

"But let me tell you of my next idea."

They all bent down, eagerly awaiting the Genius's pronouncement,

"It's quite extreme so you need to be open-minded, but I think you'll see the upside. As the results of this experiment are that good, why not actually use beautiful Conduits in the videos? Make them legitimate performers too? Bring them out of the shadows. Aggy is a beautiful girl, so a lesbian love-scene with orgasms like Elena's would sell a gazillion on its first day!"

"Bring the Conduits out of the shadows," repeated Forko, to his compatriots. They encircled Gus and put their heads together, muttering softly. Gus looked out between their robes as Betty approached.

"So her name was Aggy, was it Gus?"

Gus pushed out of the Taller Teepee and nodded,

"Yes Betty. Aggy is my little star."

"And where is she?" she asked, pulling him aside.

"No idea," he shrugged, "she didn't come into work today."

"That's because she went home," she hissed, "not to her bedsit by the Mall, but to the place of her birth."

"Really? That's a bit extreme—"

"She's the first one to ever do that Gus," hissed Betty, "what the fuck did you do to her?"

"Er, I was experimenting with a bit of, er, pain."

"You fucker Gus! I'm gonna tell Nov—"

"Gus is a genius!" Gordo, one of the Taller Teepee pronounced to everyone, "maybe it is time for the Conduits to come out of the shadows! We all need to discuss it now, and if it's a yes, we'll have to take it to the world's governments, but I for one am hopeful this could increase our profits by a thousand percent each year!" Everyone cheered and clapped Gus on the back.

A human politician from Washington asked,

"Would this mean we could bring the wars to an end?"

A few of the Taller laughed, dismissing his idea as naïve.

A moment later, Nova and another Taller woman walked up to Gus.

Nova leant over him and whispered,

"They're all much of a muchness are they Gus?" he backed against a wall, "You're lying. I can Feel it." She passed her hand near his heart, "You know she's fled, and you were

responsible. Get me more orgasms like that one, or you'll be directing dog food commercials by the end of the week."

Then she stood up and introduced her friend

"Gus, this is Gamma – Gamma, Gus . . ." and she walked away.

Gamma, a gorgeous blonde who ran all the News for the Blues, looked him over, Feeling him through.

"Oh my, you are a dirty-minded fucker aren't you?"

"Thank you ma'am, I am indeed."

"You're an empty vessel, but for your seething cesspool of sexual stardust."

"Absolutely, ma'am."

"Come to my room with me."

It didn't take long for news of Aggy's return to encircle the planet. The first one to come home from Earth was big news, and it reverberated around the entire Consensus. They were curious as to why she'd returned, but Aggy wasn't telling. She was keeping schtum, for fear of releasing all her pent-up feelings. She was waiting for them to dissipate, to fade away.

She went with her Mum to harvest the Bjorks, tote bags folded over her shoulders, followed by a few of their goats who would drag the bags when they're full. The Star was hot today, so they kept in the shade of their beloved Trees. Her Mum knew where the next Tree that needed to be picked was, because it was next to the Tree she'd picked yesterday. They naturally bloomed in turn, on schedule, like everything else about this world.

The Tree welcomed them into its branches and allowed the Bjork nuts to be plucked.

Aggy guessed that the closest plant on Earth was the Soya bean: Something versatile, that could be turned into so many different foods and drinks.

Aggy's Mum asked her about her time on Earth.

"Well, there's lots of amazing things about it. The variety of housing, for instance. Tiny, square boxes stacked on top of one another as tall as a space liner, to . . . but you know all this, as you plug in to the shows."

"Yes, I love my shows. We all watch Shandling's Castle before Arbor, and before that Frasier re-runs - that little dog! So funny. I wish we had dogs here." One of the goats looked at her resentfully. She winked at the goat then said,

"But as we plug into the Feels, does that make us part of this 'Unfeeling' you spoke about? Because I must say I'd be quite insulted if they called us that. We all feel, just not so extremely as the Humans."

Aggy shook her head,

"They don't call us that, they call our Kind the Conduits, which *I* find quite insulting."

"Conduits?"

"Because we Record the Feels of the Humans and Recall them, thus transmitting the Feels from one place to another, like water in a pipe."

"That *is* quite insulting," her mum agreed.

Aggy plucked another nut and dropped it into her tote bag,

"But the Unfeeling fits well for many of the races in the universe, doesn't it?"

"Absolutely! My friend Milli is a pilot and says some of the races she delivers the Bjorks to, are only one step up from the Walking Dead!"

They both laughed.

"But I'm being unfair to them - some of those are races on planets we've seeded which won't mature for millennia."

Aggy was intrigued,

"I didn't know that was even a thing."

"Well you never paid attention to your lessons did you Agneta?"

Aggy shrugged,

"Who does at that age? But now . . . I think I'll look into it and any job opportunities in the field . . . Maybe speak to Milli too."

"That's the spirit! There are many careers available to a smart girl like you, now you've got the Humans out of your system."

Aggy smiled as she plucked another nut from the Tree,

"Fingers crossed." she said.

Russell sat on the couch with his wife. The kids were in bed, so they were able to enjoy a glass of wine together. If you could call it being together – they were both on their phones – him typing an idea for upcoming arc, her playing that game she loved. He looked around the room at all the trappings of his success and his heart sank. He dropped his phone, picked up the remote, turned down the volume then said,

"Jen. I have a secret I want to—"

"You're fucking your Conduit aren't you?" she screamed, throwing down her phone.

"No! I'm totally faithful to you and love you absolutely," he said, taking her hands in his, "it's to do with my work, and my Conduits and the rest of their Kind, and in fact, the whole world, but it's a secret. So you can't tell anyone . . ."

Mother and Daughter carried on picking the Bjorks.

"So have I seen any show you worked on? I know you told me you were working on a lot of different ones?"

Aggy was reluctant to say, but her Mum waited patiently, picking the Bjorks and placing them in the tote bag.

"I didn't plan it, but I somehow ended up working in the Adult Entertainment department."

"Porno?" asked her Mum, "how exciting. Were you recording the actor's Feels?"

"Yes, Mum."

"That must have been interesting?"

"I thought you'd be upset?"

"Someone has to do it, if we're to get the orgasms."

"Mum! Don't!"

"My favourite is 'Husband's Night Out' - did you work on that? she's so horny and is always—"

"Mum!"

"Come on Sweetheart. Would you rather I was a prude who disapproved of you helping produce the Humans' greatest export?"

Aggy shrugged, partly ashamed, disgusted, embarrassed and prudish all at once. Her Mum continued,

"And Milli says a lot of the races call the Humans' planet 'Orgasma'."

"Mum!"

"Sorry, so tell me why you've come home?"

"It wasn't what I'd hoped. It looked so light and fluffy on the adverts, like Utopia; but in reality, there was a dark side like the Porno, and the racism, and the guns, and the rape and—"

"Oh, I'm so sorry. Why didn't you say anything in your emails?"

"I was embarrassed, I suppose. After running away like that."

"Well. You're home now. Safe with me and the Consensus."

They walked towards the road, the goats dragging the tote bags behind them, just as the plume of steam was showing above the Trees. Right on time, the truck halted and Jiffy got out to collect their bags.

"Jiffy, you remember my daughter?"

Jiffy smiled widely,

"Indeed I do," she said, blushing slightly, "so great to have you home Aggy."

Aggy blushed too, and rocked on her heels, trying not to emote too much.

"You should come over tonight," her Mum said, "we're having a Welcome Home party for her."

Jiffy jumped into her truck nodding vigorously,

"I wouldn't miss it!"

Chapter Four

Jen sat in her parked car opposite the entrance to Earth Almighty studios, intermittently checking the results on her Earth Almighty betting app. She had a number of bets placed on various games, which, if she was lucky, might pull her out of the hole she'd dug for herself. She watched the people coming in and out, through the picket line of lawyers and bankers. The occasional Banjo was among them.

So Earth was not alone in the Universe. That, in itself, wasn't surprising, but she was astounded to hear that it was teaming with thousands of races who all loved the Beatles and tuned in to Shandling's Castle! It was hard to get her head around that.

And the Banjos? Or as Russell called them, the Conduits. An alien race who could 'Feel' Human emotions and record them? For the Unfeeling - races who felt very little emotion thus loved the Feels produced on Earth? The whole thing was unbelievable. And why hadn't this secret got out? Because it was unbelievable! Russell must've been high! Maybe he *was* screwing his Conduit, and his massive imagination had spewed out this fantasy on the spur of the moment when she confronted him? No, he wasn't that stupid, and she hadn't confronted him – he'd volunteered it. And in general, he'd been a good husband and father, if a bit absent. So was she to accept his preposterous claims?

Jen saw who she'd been watching for. A slim boy who was too old to have his jeans falling around his thighs. He was having to walk bow-legged to keep them up. He approached and held out a pizza box,

"Here's your lunch, lady," Jen took it and palmed him a fifty, "geddit?" he said, grinning like the stoned buffoon he was.

"No." she said, closing the window. He shrugged and hobbled off.

She opened the box, slid her hand under the cold pizza and found one of the blister packs she had purchased. Retrieving it, she absent-mindedly popped a pill from its bubble and knocked it back with a glug of water. Annoying that the boy's patch was so close to Russell's work, but she'd never known of him to walk out to lunch, so she'd stopped worrying. She knew the pill couldn't be affecting her already, but she felt better just knowing it was inside her.

A Conduit emerged from the gate and as she got closer, Jen recognized her as one of Russell's child wranglers on Shandling's Castle. It was the first one she'd seen up close since Russell's revelation. It looked human, if a little small, dark and freckly, but there were plenty of people like that in the world. Only now she knew, could she recognize the subtle differences.

As the Conduit passed, their eyes met and they smiled. On impulse, Jen jumped out of the car and said Hi!

The Conduit turned and smiled,

"Hello. You're Russell's wife aren't you? I've seen you on set—"

"That's right, I'm Jen."

"Hi Jen, I'm Zooey."

"I was just going to get some lunch. Want to join me?"

Zooey wasn't sure,

"Well – I was on my way to a Circle, but I can go this evening."

Jen nodded and they walked together for a moment before Jen said,

"I know. Russell told me the other day."

Zooey stopped walking, raised her eyebrows (false, Jen now realized) and said,

"Wow!"

Jen raised her real eyebrows,

"Why so surprised?"

Zooey shrugged,

"Because I just assumed you knew already?"

Jen nodded and took her arm,

"Oh, I have so many questions for you..." She steered them down a side street towards a place she used to go with Russell, before the kids were born.

Jen steered Zooey to a booth at the back of the Lebanese restaurant, where no one could overhear them. Jen knew exactly what she wanted and told the waiter. Zooey just said,

"I'll have what she's having."

"So you're not from the Yellows?"

"No, we come from a planet on the other side of the universe. I think it took about two days to get here?"

"That would imply you were going faster than the speed of light?"

"Absolutely. It would've taken thousands of years otherwise."

"So you have the technology to do that?"

"Of course. We've had it for many millennia."

"Your civilization is that old."

"Coming up to a million—"

"No way! Is it all flying cars and silver skyscrapers?"

Zooey shook her head,

"Mainly steam-engines and wood. A lot of wood," she said, rolling her eyes, "we even live in the Trees!"

"Like monkeys?" asked Jen.

"Not quite, I'm putting it down because I found it soooo boring, but my Mum's tree-house was very luxurious."

"So was that a conscious decision not to allow 'development' to ruin the planet?"

"I think so, though I'm not too good on my history . . ."

"I loved history, though it's very weird; I've been helping the kids with their homework and their books tell a story that I'm not familiar with? Have we always been at war with the Reds?"

"They say history is written by the victors?"

"But no one has won this war - it just seems to be going on forever, and I'm sure we used to be at war with the Yellows, but there's no mention of that."

Their food arrived. The waiter laid identical dishes before them with a flourish: succulent Shish Kebabs.

As they prepared to eat their food, Jen noticed Zooey looking pained,

"Are you okay?"

Zooey nodded,

"Can I touch your hand while we eat? I get to smell and taste so much that way."

"Really? I did not know that," said Jen as she laid her hand in the center of the table.

"Neither did I until the other day when my friend told me. It's opened up a whole new world of delights!"

Zooey lay her fingers on top of Jen's, immediately Feeling her kindness and love for her children and Russell.

"Ready?"

They both popped pieces of lamb into their mouths and Zooey was transported to another level of ecstasy.

"So are all your senses dulled because of your telepathic ability?"

"I wouldn't describe them as dulled of course, just less acute than yours, but maybe you're right."

Aggy woke from her siesta to the sound of clinking crockery outside her bedroom window. Her Mum had prepared a table laid with food for her friends and neighbours. Some were already arriving. Jiffy rolled a barrel of beer before her. Aggy wasn't sure about them coming to welcome her home. She worried that they'd be able to Feel her frustrations and dissatisfaction about her time on Earth. Maybe they'd judge her for having picked up the emotions of the Humans?

She went down and joined them, and her worries were swept away in a wave of kindness and warmth. Jiffy poured her a glass of beer, and she fell into telling some amusing anecdotes, but every story had some facet she couldn't impart. Her frustration grew, until finally it burst out of her, like a scream, a bomb, a tsunami, and a steam-roller all-in-one. Everyone staggered and vibrated and screamed and laughed and found tears in their eyes. All were dumbfounded and looked to Aggy for an explanation.

"That is what I had to contend with every day on Earth. It's beautiful, but also ugly and mean and I just didn't want to be there anymore. It was corrupting me."

"So you're emoting," asked Jiffy, "like a Human?"

Aggy nodded sheepishly,

"I've recorded so many of the emotions, that I seem to have absorbed them."

"Then we need to help you let them all out," her Mum said, "you'll have to connect with the Consensus, and we can dilute them until they've gone, okay?"

Aggy nodded. She was tired and ashamed. She hugged her Mum, bowed to the rest, and was about to go when her Mum said,

"Now, Agnëta."

Jen ordered another delicious dish she thought Zooey might appreciate along with a sweeter wine.

"I've heard you girls congregate in the recreation grounds? Is that a religious thing?"

Zooey nodded,

"Yeah, that's where I was going when I met you. But it's not religious, but meditative - we start with a small circle, then others create another circle behind us—"

"I saw a photo. There must've been a thousand of you?"

"Yeah, we're exchanging, which is like you catching up with a school friend over a weekend, but it's almost instantaneous for us."

"Awesome," said Jen.

"Then we kind of melt into one another and it's very calming."

The wine arrived and they touched fingers and drank. Zooey's eyes popped with delight.

"I thought you'd like it," Jen said, "so when you're melted into one another what are you thinking about?"

Zooey shrugged,

"It's difficult to describe, but on occasion, we have debates on certain subjects."

"Like?"

" Worker's Rights?"

Jen nodded approvingly.

"Individually, we are normal people, but together, we meld into one being, with untold capabilities. Half a million years ago, as the Consensus, we calculated Pi up to a thousand decimal points in ten minutes. We've invented amazing machines, like the Hoppers, but we have no imagination for Art. Which, now we've discovered it, I hope future generations will be inspired to create some for themselves."

"What are the Hoppers?" Jen asked.

"They're hubs dotted all over the universe. Like a train station, joined to many other stations?"

"So there are tracks in space?"

"Not physical tracks, but some kind of power tube because the Liners get fired from one Hopper to another in minutes, then fired on again without stopping.

"So it's the Hoppers that have the energy?"

"Yeah, the Liners only have electromagnetic turbines for short journeys and take-off and landing."

"So your Kind built a Hopper nearby in space?"

"Our Kind? No way, we just come up with the physics and leave it to others to capitalize on them."

Zooey picked up her glass and raised her eyebrows. Jen smiled and picked up her glass then touched Zooey's hand and they both drank the wine.

"But it's only a terminal at the moment. There really is nothing of note near Earth, anywhere for a million light-years. You truly are alone."

"Were."

They both laughed. But then Jen saw a frown crinkle Zooey's brow,
"What?"

Zooey shook her head but then said,

"We went to Nova's compound. Up by the Hollywood sign? It was a party and there were lots of the Taller people there. They were talking about work of course, and one suggested a war documentary where our Kind would be on the Front Lines, recording the Feels of the soldiers as they fight and die . . . "

Jen was horrified,

"Surely they can't do that?"

Zooey shrugged,

"It'd be hard as an individual to refuse, but collectively?"

Jen nodded and raised her glass to:

"Unionization!"

Zooey drank the toast, while squeezing Jen's finger. The wine was delicious. Who knew? She was feeling quite tipsy and didn't want to stop,

“And another thing happened at this party which was disturbing was this one guy, from the porno department of Earth Almighty suggested our Kind should be made public to the world, specifically so we could all start doing porn of course —”

Jen spluttered into her wine glass,

“Innovations have often come from the Sex industry apparently – secure online payments, compressed video formats —”

“Sure, but it was something another human guy asked which stuck in my mind – that if they made us public, then could they stop the Endless War?”

Jen scowled,

“Why would that be? Because you all always say ‘I'm from the Reds, but was tortured for speaking out against the war’ and if there was no war you wouldn't be able to say that anymore? That doesn't make any sense.”

“I know. Maybe you should ask Russell? And I'll take that to the Circle too.”

They toasted their brilliant conclusion.

Heidi and James snogged on his bed. She could Feel no heartbreak within him anymore, though some of his still lingered within her that she couldn't seem to eject. But it didn't dampen her feeling for him. Her love had grown for him, and his for her. He was happy again and had said that his unrequited, life-long crush on Jo, had been just that, and that kiss in the bar hadn't really changed anything, in reality. It was still just a crush. She was glad he'd said it, though she

couldn't really dispel the feeling that she'd been wrong to vacuum his grief from him. But so what? He was happy and was falling in love with her, which was her ambition ever since she first Felt him. Though she had noticed that his output had decreased since they'd got together . . .

When Zoocy returned to work Tiggy knew she hadn't gone to the Circle. And that she'd got drunk instead. Luckily it was their afternoon off. She put her in the car and started the long drive home. Then she'd go to a Circle herself and share about being sent to the front line. It was something all her Kind should know.

Aggy sat in the Tree next to her bedroom window and tried to meditate. The others had also climbed into various Trees and seemed to already be in the process that she was finding so hard. It'd been ages, but slowly she felt the Tree wrap her in its humming bubble, and she slowly reconnected with the Consensus.

She Felt millions of souls from all over the planet comforting her. She wanted to just absorb their Care but couldn't help share her experiences of life on Earth: The lovely Conductor who welcomed her, but made everyone else she met a disappointment. The emotions of the people that bowled her over with their beauty while she walked in the streets, but then others that terrorized her with their broadcasts of anger and hatred. The all-powerful love a parent had for their child, contrasting, in the very same person, with their distrust of anything different from themselves, including Aggy and her Kind. The racism she encountered daily. The exploitative nature of the work, and the uncaring attitude of her bosses. And her surprise that she was the first to choose to come home. Maybe that's because she Felt so much pain and despair from the porn

stars and had taken it on board? Maybe the others of her Kind on Earth didn't feel the same as her. But should they?

She sat there alone in silence. She heard and felt nothing replying to her litany of disappointment. Had she said too much? But then she felt a little rumbling in the ground below her, and a growing hum of the Consensus, then a flood of warmth, and a reassurance that things would change. She went back to bed feeling relieved that she'd unburdened herself, and slept peacefully for the first time in a while.

Tiggy left Zooey snoring and went to the local Circle. There were about a hundred of her Kind sitting in circles and she joined the back row. It's not an easy phenomenon to describe – a large group being able to receive information in all its formats, as well as Feels on top, from everyone simultaneously, and be able to sift and filter it into an order that made sense. The big news was about Aggy walking out of the one-one-six and going home. She was the first to do this, and people were baffled. Why had no one done this before? Had they not considered it as a possibility? There was a lot of back-and-forth on the subject and Tiggy took it all in then waited for a lull before dropping her revelation about them being sent to war. There was some reaction, especially from those that worked for Earth Almighty, mainly rumbles of discontent. Tiggy also dropped the other snippet but wasn't sure she was clear what she was trying to impart. When it was over a few came to chat to her and express their anger at Earth Almighty, but she knew that this was just the start. It would take days, if not weeks, to spread throughout their Kind, before some resolution (if any) would be agreed upon.

The next day, after breakfast, Aggy ran some errands for her Mum. First stop was the Well for water. She asked two of the goats to come help. She pulled up the pail and sipped some from her hand. It was clean and delicious and always had been.

It reminded her of Tiggy who had been born near the source of the planet's water supply. It never rained except at the poles of the planet where there were mountain ranges, shrouded in clouds that cried continuous torrents, rolling down the rock. Tiggy said the Waterfalls, thousands of meters high, seemed to move in slow-motion, as they fed the rivers and aquifers that irrigated the whole planet.

Aggy filled the goat's panniers and walked them home. Next, she went to the Community Hall. This day was Share your Vegetables Day and Aggy had bunches of Radishes that had been growing in the crooks of the Trees' roots. The Hall was pyramidal, like the Arbors, grown of the same roots.

Families greeted her as if she was a celebrity, which, on reflection, she supposed she was! A mother and daughter were in a disagreement. The girl was sad because her Mum wouldn't let her go to Earth. She gave Aggy a sneer and huffed off. Aggy was taken aback. Her Mum apologized,

"I'm sorry Aggy. She is disappointed, but after what we understood from you, most Mums will not be allowing their children to go, until things change."

Her friend nodded,

"and I have emailed my twins to come home. They weren't excited about the idea but then they admitted Earth wasn't what they'd hoped. They're handing in their notice."

Another Mum nodded in agreement,

"I'm going to email mine too."

Aggy was pleasantly surprised. She looked towards the Spaceport and saw Cargo ships launching, but no Liners.

But if there are no Liners then the Conductor will be out of his job, was her first thought. Second came the realization that change was possible. She reached into her hoodie pocket and pulled out the leaflet about unionization.

Heidi and James stood holding hands, looking out across London from their new apartment on the 34th floor of a Thames-side block. Rented with his earnings from his poetry, they'd been having fun shopping for furniture and experiencing the luxuries of the city like the newly rich teenagers they were.

"Have you had any ideas?" asked Heidi.

"Yeah, how about that classic 'Mata Hari' pinball machine we saw earlier? It'd go really good in that corner—"

"No - I meant for your writing."

"Oh, no, I haven't. Hadn't even thought about it."

"But you were so obsessed with it?"

"Yeah, I was, wasn't I?"

Heidi shook her head. What had she done to him? Had she extracted his creativity along with his grief?

At the desert Station, the dashing Conductor waited for the next scheduled Liner, but for the first time in years it was late. He checked his pocket watch again. Thirty minutes? What could have happened? The Driver walked down the platform and joined him.

They watched the sky, but no clouds were in sight.

"What shall we do?"

"I don't know. It might just be a one-off? I'll text Control."

They waited for a response in the shade of the awning and shared a cigarette. The phone pinged.

"Apparently it's happening all over the world. No liners have landed."

"Maybe there's a technical glitch of some sort?"

"Maybe."

"Then let's wait for the three-o'clock. Want to share my lunch?"

They got on board and went to his office.

As they ate, the Conductor was reminded of Aggy, and he wondered if the no-show could have anything to do with her discontent. He reached for his phone and fired off a text.

Betty brought Nova and Magga cocktails on the deck. She waited for instructions about lunch, trying not to focus on them (they could tell when she was Feeling them out).

It was no secret that they'd known each other since childhood and had been inseparable ever since. That was why it had been decided that Magga should be head of News Media North America (or News for the Blues for short) so they could be physically close, as opposed to using the scrolls.

Betty's visions of their childhood, that she'd Felt over the years was mysterious and scary, and made no sense to her. That they now lay before her, magnificent in their micro-bikinis, seemed incongruous. Were they like butterflies that had emerged from their cocoons as fully-formed supermodels? That would account for the weird visions, if before that, they'd been larvae. They'd've swum around in soupy liquids together, playing Dress-up, Hide and Seek, and Tic Tac Toe. It would have--

"Betty! More ice for fucksake!"

"How many times?"

Betty ran inside to refill the ice-bucket.

Nova's phone pinged. She read the text and clenched her jaw. Betty, returning with ice, Felt her anger.

"What's up?" asked Magga

"The Liners aren't landing."

Betty tried to look surprised,

"Do you think it's a technical fault? Star flares? Or—"

"Or what, Betty?"

"Maybe they're making a point?"

"What point?"

"Oh, I don't know," shrugged Betty, "that their Kind are being exploited?"

Nova and Magga shook their heads,

"No, it couldn't be that."

Betty looked out over the city and rolled her eyes.

Tiggy and Zooey were getting ready to go to work. Always difficult as their place was so cramped, but doubly so, because of the casts on their various limbs. Zooey's phone pinged. It was an email from her Mum. She read an excerpt to Tiggy,

"We heard from your friend Aggy yesterday, about how you were assaulted by racists (are you all healed?) and how she was treated at work. About how all our Kind are treated. This is not what we agreed to with the Taller. They promised you'd be looked after. I'm not happy about you being there anymore. I want you to come home my darling. I'm very worried about you, and Tiggy too. Her Mum also wants her home."

As they walked to their car, they were both silent, weighing the pros and cons. They, of course, knew what the other had concluded: That Russell would never let them be drafted to the front line (admittedly, a very selfish "I'm alright, Jack" attitude), and even after their beating, they were mostly enjoying their life, especially their work, and they wouldn't be going home.

Heidi's mum sent her a very similar email, and this was the first that Heidi had heard of Aggy, the girl who'd had enough. The email gave her pause. Was she being taken advantage of? She could certainly be earning more money, and the ghetto-ish flat-share in Dollis Hill was not ideal, but no one (at work) had molested her. The closest at work was Sona. She'd felt his crush on her and it had been embarrassing, but he'd never touched her. Anyway, she'd heard a rumor that he'd turned his attention on to another of her Kind, from the Heavy Metal department. Apparently, she hadn't been exactly happy about it. According to her, he'd 'made love' to her inside his Echo Chamber when it was actually running. While it had enhanced his performance and orgasm by a

thousand-fold (his words), she'd Felt horrified throughout the whole two minutes and fifteen seconds.

No, she didn't consider leaving for a moment. She wrote a polite refusal, saying London was very different to LA, and anyway, she was falling in love, so it would be really bad timing to leave now. She didn't expand on that. Her mum didn't need to know. She'd only worry.

It was a day later when the Conductor waited at the desert station for the Liner with a group of Conduits. He had been surprised to see them at the Mall. He would've liked to implore them to stay, but they all told a similar story to Aggy's. As no Liners had been landing, he hoped for their sake that this one arrived, but then assumed that they knew something he didn't.

Right on schedule the Liner, hidden inside the cloud, drifted down and they were enveloped in the steamy camouflage. His heart sank as the girls all bowed to him then headed to the Liner as the ramps swung down. But his mood lifted when he saw others disembarking in the fog. The two groups excitedly greeted and hugged one another, then split and carried on walking.

He readied to greet these new pioneers, but they weren't interested in his welcome. They smiled and bowed but sidestepped him, slapped Nova's face to infuse the languages, then climbed aboard the train. He followed them on and noticed that they weren't dressed like his usual young passengers, in jeans and t-shirts. Their clothes looked handmade from an orange, woven fabric. And they all seemed a bit older than normal.

"Hello and Welcome," he said to the nearest ones, "how are you?"

"Hello kind Conductor. I am here to collect my girl. She works at an employment agency for our Kind, in the Mall above the station where this train will arrive. Do those directions make sense to you?"

"Well yes ma'am. They do. I can show you the place when we arrive there. But I'm a little confused. I've never had—"

"Don't be confused. I understood Aggy's thoughts and don't want my daughter working here. I emailed her, but she refused, so I've come to get her."

The Conductor smiled and nodded. So, it *was* Aggy that had created this situation.

The other passengers all put up their hands:

"Do you know where the Earth Almighty Lot is please?" another Mum asked,
"specifically the Shandling's Castle Stage?"

"Where is Seventy-Seven, Sunset Strip please?"

"How would I find Bloomingdale's?"

Zooey was on a darkened set, waiting for action to be called. She could Feel that Tom was nervous. This was the Love Scene, and even though they'd be under a sheet, both the teenagers were embarrassed by so many eyes watching them.

Zooey thought of her Mum. Then Felt her. She was in the building and calling her! *Where are you Zooey?* Zooey tried to mask herself, but knew it was useless. She was closing in on her.

"Zooey?"

She turned and there was her Mum smiling and running towards her. They hugged and Exchanged. Then her Mum grasped her earlobe and pulled her away, like when she was a child.

"Mum!"

Zooey tried to dig her heels in, but her Mum gripped her earlobe tighter and she relented.

They were followed by Tiggy who stayed just out of range of her other hand.

"You're coming home with me young lady - this experiment has failed. Look at yourself - look at both of you with casts on your broken bones!"

They crossed paths with Russell who asked what was going on.

"This is my Mum, Russell," Zooey said, "Mum, this is my boss, Russell."

"The writer and director of Shandling's Castle? Oh, I love your work."

Russell held out his hand to shake hers and she took it, and promptly fell over, overcome by the tsunami of creative Feels radiating from the man. Zooey, now free, rubbed her earlobe, and smiled at Tiggy - her plan had worked.

Russell tried to help her up, but grasping her hand again just made her collapse again.

When she awoke Dora was lying on the chaise in Russell's office. She sat up and was joined by Zooey and Tiggy. Russell sat a safe distance away on the other side of the coffee table. He took a deep breath and launched into his pitch,

"Look, there's obviously a lot wrong with this world. Apparently, according to statistics we have an enormous proportion of warmongers in our race who just want to kill people who are different to themselves, and if they can't do that, kill each other.

Then there's the massive percentage of sex addicts."

On his tablet, he drew a Venn diagram with two big circles intersecting almost halfway.

“And then we have the watchers. They do nothing except drink, take drugs, gamble and masturbate.” Their circle intersected with the sex addicts circle with just a teeny edge cutting into the warmonger’s portion.

“Then, miraculously, we have quite a sizeable circle for the Creators, which hardly intersects with any of the others at all. But which, as you are aware, is our saving grace; and the reason why I think we need to stay and make the change happen ourselves,” he raised his arms and smiled, “but maybe that’s something you can talk about at your next Circle? In the meantime, Dora, can I just ask you not to take them home right now? We’re in the middle of this arc between Beatrice and Tom and we can’t do it without Tiggy and Zooey.”

Dora hummed and tilted her head.

"I'll put you all up in a nice hotel in Venice Beach?"

Russell knew of their love of Venice Beach, as did Dora who wanted to see it. She nodded.

Aggy had watched some of her contemporaries return to their mums and in general it had been nice to bump into them. But some were a bit resentful of her, for spoiling their fun.

"It's not forever," she'd tell them, "hopefully, you'll be back there soon, getting paid properly for a job you want to do."

She spent some time every day with Jiffy, walking or boating on the river.

Everywhere had a river, or to be more accurate, a latticework of rivers. Like the Trees being evenly spaced, the water was too, ensuring every Tree was well irrigated.

Jiffy had loved boats almost as much as she had loved Aggy, ever since school. Though she had never said it out loud, Aggy knew. It was hard to keep anything a secret on this planet.

Jiffy's ambition was to take a boat all the way to the equator to see where the waters from the North and South poles mixed. Apparently, they were different shades of blue, but it was only apparent on the equator. Jiffy suggested that it might be something they could do together, stopping off at various five-star hotels and resorts along the way? It sounded lovely, drifting downstream to the equator. Then, Aggy supposed, they would take a train home? Jiffy laughed, but then realized Aggy wasn't joking. Rowing upstream didn't appeal to her. Then you can watch me, said Jiffy, flexing her muscles in a way that made Aggy go weak at the knees.

If the water flows down from the poles to the equator, Aggy asked, why isn't there an enormous bulge of water there, or flooding?

Jiffy pondered this for a moment then said that the water fed all the Trees and Communities on the way down, meaning the flow would have slowed to almost zero by the time it got to the equator and any excess would be evaporated and return to the poles. Aggy was impressed. It might be a good education, or Jiffy was so quick witted that she could come up with a logical explanation in moments.

Heidi had left James sleeping and was walking to work. They'd made love earlier and afterwards; in the shower she'd had an idea for a poem. She'd jumped out, and, still wet, had dictated the phrases into her phone. Normally, she loved her work, but this new-found* talent was distracting her – obsessing her even. Also, she wasn't looking forward to seeing Sona. Since she'd rebuffed him, he was a bit snippy with her.

(*stolen?)

Nova and Betty sat on the terrace,

"So the idea of upping our game to Real Feels is dependent on an increase of immigration by four-hundred percent, but the Liners aren't landing."

"Oh, I've just had a call from the Mall. A Liner did land—"

"Fantastic! So it was a technical problem or—"

"No, seemingly it was the Consensus that had stopped them flying," said Betty, unable to meet Nova's gaze, "and this one was full of Mums coming to take their children home."

Nova clenched her jaw. Betty looked out over the city,

"This is happening all over the world apparently. The mums are coming in droves."

Aggy's Mum, Alli was preparing for her usual evening cooking for her friend Milli, the pilot.

Milli was on time, as ever, and Alli called her daughter to come and join them. Aggy came down and hugged Milli, and they Exchanged.

"You're feeling better, it seems?" said Milli with a smile.

Aggy nodded,

"Yes , you know? I think I am. My shame has evaporated, like the rivers at the Equator."

She cringed. She was trying to be poetic, but had failed miserably, raising her shame level back up to a two.

Milli didn't seem to notice, and they sat down to eat. They chatted about Milli's work as a pilot, delivering the Bjorks to far off planets, and monitoring some of their more primitive customers for signs of evolutionary development. Aggy was intrigued and asked many questions, realizing

that there were many exciting jobs available, other than picking the Bjorks. Milli regaled them with a few horror stories, entrancing the both of them, then finished with, "I've seen things you people wouldn't believe. Attack ships on fire off the shoulder of Orion. I watched C-beams glitter in the dark near the Tannhäuser Gate. All those moments will be lost in time, like tears—"

"Hang on," Aggy interrupted, "that's Rutger Hauer's speech from Blade Runner!"

They all laughed,

"Nice try," said Alli.

"Talking of Blade Runner, I run a Movie Club every week and would love you to come along," Milli said to Aggy, "we're actually going through classic movies in chronological order and we're up to the early Seventies, so we've just had 'A Clockwork Orange' and 'Walkabout' and next up is 'The Godfather' and 'Deliverance'."

"Wow," said Aggy, "you're really going all out to show the pleasant, sunny side of the Human Condition, aren't you?"

"Yes Aggy," said Milli, with a smirk, "I guess I am. But it is quite fitting, don't you think, after what made you want to return home?"

Aggy nodded,

"Absolutely, the movies should act as warnings to all races not to approach this planet, but at the same time, they are great art."

"Come along and do your party trick. Hold hands while you watch and emote for us?"

Her mum thought it was a brilliant idea and Aggy thought it might be fun.

"Maybe," she said, "if I feel up to it."

Milli thanked her and wished them both goodnight. Aggy went to her room and for the first time, turned on the screen. She waited for it to warm up then twiddled the knob, scrolling through the channels,

"Five hundred stations and nothing on!"

Chapter Five

Betty's day off was this very day (the third Sunday of the month). She had got up early and was in her car before Nova was even out of her Echo Chamber. Still not feeling confident about her navigating even after all these years, she had followed her Sat-Nav's directions, all the way to the Recreation Ground. As she parked beside the sidewalk, she saw Tiggy and Zooey drive by. She waved and they stopped, agreeing to meet at the back of the Circle nearest the Cafe.

It was always difficult to see how many people were there until they sat down, but Betty was shocked by the turn-out. Thousands had come, wanting to hear first-hand about the Tallers' plottings. Betty waited for Tiggy and Zooey then they all sat down together, holding hands, placing their bare feet on the bare back of the girl in front.

They shut their eyes and waited. A peace came over them and many gentle meditations condensed then evaporated, images coalesced, thoughts expressed, and then fears . . . could we end up on the frontline? Might we be forced to act in porn? Is it our fault the Endless War continues - to mask our real origin? The uncertainty flowed around the Circle and the anxiety spiraled.

Betty decided to open herself, infusing the Circle with a comforting warmth. They recognized her (although this was supposedly anonymous, it was hard for them not to identify the first of their Kind to have arrived on Earth) and calmed themselves.

Like all of them, Betty wasn't using words, but she cited Aggy's action as an example of a difficult choice, but one that was obvious in hindsight. But when you're in it, being abused at work, in debt to Earth Almighty, unable to pay the bills, your thoughts can be blurred into thinking 'work harder', 'get a second job', not 'fuck this, I'm out'. And maybe that's what we

should be thinking. The Liners are landing every day and can take you away, you have homes to return to, you can make a point - they need us more than we need them.”

There was a silence as the Circle considered, then resounding applause.

Betty added,

"But it will only work if we do it together!" and the applause grew.

It was clear everyone's mind was made up: If Aggy could do it, we can do it. A Hollywood walk-out. In two weeks, we all jump on a Liner and go see our folks until our demands are met – No going to the frontline, plus improved wages, working and living conditions.

Tiggy and Zooey still weren't convinced, but they, among all of their Kind, had the best jobs (in their opinion) and didn't want to let Russell down. He'd been so kind to them, treating them like equals, paying them weekly bonuses, they felt they should go talk to him about it first.

Betty gave Tiggy and Zooey a lift home after the Circle. It was quiet in the car, but they knew what she was thinking. Finally she spoke,

"I talk the talk, but I can't walk the walk."

"Because you can't leave?"

"My whole life on Earth, I've been in chains."

"Why don't we go to the Mall right now? You could be on—"

"Because she knows where I am at this moment. She'd know if I boarded that train and would be waiting for me in the desert. I'm tagged like a dog, or a handbag."

Tiggy and Zooey drove to Russell's house after work. They didn't want to be overheard by any of the cast or crew.

Jen opened the door to them and gave them both a hug. They both Felt the discomfort within Jen but kept quiet. Russell was typing ideas on his phone when they walked into the Living room.

"He never stops," said Jen, "Literally - he cannot stop."

Ironie, thought Tiggy as they sat down and Jen poured them a nice Pinot.

The 'hairiest man in the world' looked up and smiled, putting down the phone, causing Jen's eye-brows to elevate.

"Uh-oh," he said to his wranglers, "this looks ominous."

"Funny you should say that." said Zooey.

"Or not funny you should say that." said Tiggy, looking sheepish, "because we're all doing an Aggy in two weeks."

"Leaving?" he looked devastated, "forever?"

"Not necessarily, depends on negotiations I suppose," said Zooey, "but our entire Circle (of all of our Kind working for Earth Almighty, and in Hollywood in general) have decided to make a statement by going home. We are not going to be made to go to the frontline."

Russell was speechless. Jen said,

"Can we come?"

The Conduits shrugged,

"Don't see why not?" they said in unison, smiling. They were sitting at the end of the table, with the husband and wife sitting opposite each other. They looked into each other's eyes, then both said the same thing,

"I want to help you, but I can't help you here."

Tiggy and Zooey almost teared up, Feeling the love between the two, and their strange desperation, which meant that, in their own successful, white man way, they too were stuck on the hamster wheel.

"I can stop", said Jen, reaching for his hand, "just not here."

"Me too," said Russell, gripping her hand tightly, "I do need to stop, or I'll be dead within the year," he turned to his Conduits, "and two weeks is perfect, as the arc with the kids will end then, when they run off into the sunset together, and it'll be a great place to take a break."

They all looked at each other and smiled, then Jen said,

"Shandling's Castle on hiatus? What was unthinkable a minute ago, just became a possibility . . . "

"Well, that was weird." said Zooey, as they drove home.

"A little surprising," agreed Tiggy, "and do we know if they're even allowed to do that?"

"I guess all we can do is ask? The Consensus can always say no, but I'm betting that there's only a few people who they would welcome, and the creator of Shandling's Castle is one of them."

"Along with Paul McCartney, and . . . "

"Stephen King?"

"and Shonda Rhimes?"

"and Christopher Nolan?"

"and Madonna?"

"and Martin Scorsese?"

"and Noel Gallagher?"

"But not his brother."

"Certainly not!"

"Hey, I heard about a new poet from London? James someone? His Feels are bonkers, apparently. They can make you weep like a baby."

"Sounds delightful. Though, do we actually want to weep like babies?"

"I know I do."

Gus was pacing around a dark set, scrolling through his contacts on his phone. The scene was a plush bedroom with heavy fabric. Elena lay on the bed reading a book, "The Art of War".

Gus chose someone and pressed 'call'. The line was dead. He tried another,

"Hey Mandi, thank god, everyone seems to have their phones turned off. Sorry for the short notice, but can you come in right now?"

He listened for a moment,

"No, this is just a screen test, or more a Feel test? We're not filming, we just want to see how well you can make Elena come."

Gus listened for a moment,

"Well, how do you think you'd make her come? You've been at the one-one-six for a year now, it's time to step up—"

He stopped talking and looked at his phone*, then swore,

"Fuck, I'm running out of Banjos here." He went back to scrolling through his contacts.

*Looking at your phone when someone hangs up is a legitimate action these days, as you can see if they've hung up or put you on hold, etc. What annoyed me in the past, in TV and Movies, was that when people got hung up on, they would look at the handset of their landline, as though it had some information to impart. When, obviously, it did not.

Russell was nervous about going to see Nova. For One, she was much taller than him, and peered down at him, which he always found intimidating. He'd never liked people taller than himself, or to be more accurate, he was distrustful of people taller than he was, until he got to know them.

And Two, she scared the bananas out of him.

He walked out on to the massive deck and saw her sitting under an umbrella, seemingly, a mile away. Once he got there, he was hot and flustered.

"Russell! You look hot and flustered!" Nova said, as though she had read his mind, which she had,

"Want an iced tea? Help yourself then join me under the umbrella."

He did as asked, and took a long gulp of the tea, then tried to talk. But nothing was forthcoming.

He hated confrontation, or any form of disagreement off the filmset, and he knew telling her was—

"Oh fuck!" she shouted, "they're walking out!" as she jumped from her chair, "and you did nothing to stop them!"

Russell squirmed in his chair, put his hand up to deny—

"and you want to shut down Shandling's Castle while they're on strike!"

Betty came running on to the Deck to see what all the ruckus was about.

"A fucking hiatus? To recharge the batteries?" screamed Nova, while throwing shrubs and loungers off the deck, "you're such a fucking pussy, Russell! Did they talk you into this?"

Russell shook his head and was about to say—

"But the show couldn't go on without Beatrice and Tom's, and everyone else's Conduits? How about I sack you and get a real showrunner and new Banjos?" she bellowed into his face, "because all the Banjos in L.A are going home?" Russell nodded, "then we'll ship them in from wherever, I will not be fucked about by a bunch of Banjos, or you, Russell, get out!"

Nova straightened up and saw Betty.

"And you Betty! Out!"

Russell, having not said a word, scuttled away, followed closely by Betty.

When they were standing by his car, he was about to ask if she'd like to come into the city with him, but she was already opening the passenger door.

On a billion TVs on Earth, and a few trillion across the universe, Tom and Beatrice ran out of the house and away from their warring families, to their new life. The camera craned up and the screen faded to black.

As the credits rolled across the interior set, Shandling's Castle's elder statesman, Chaz Plank, the actor who played Beatrice's grandfather approached and spoke directly into the camera,

“Well, our last show for a while. We’ve decided we all need a break from the gruelling schedule of live Telly five-days-a-week.”

Other members of the cast joined him hugged each other then they all said,

“So, we’re all taking a vacation – on full pay! Watch out for an announcement about our return later in the year.”

They bowed as the screen faded to black.

“And we’re out!” cried the Assistant Director.

Across the universe, three trillion faces stared at their screen, slowly displaying their heartbreak, horror, anger, and need for a pee, in three trillion different ways.

Aggy was trying to connect to the Consensus every day to help herself heal. She could Feel a lot of effort was being put into her wellbeing and it was working. But there was something about the way they treated her that was different from before she went to Earth. Obviously, she'd only just left school then and now she was a grown woman, but there was something different about it.

It couldn't be her celebrity could it?

She asked her Mum that night whether they were treating her differently, and her Mum was forthright, saying that they thought she was the one.

"The one?" asked Aggy, "the one what? The Messiah?"

Anni laughed,

"Don't get too full of yourself Aggy. No, the one to represent us. The one Voice of the Consensus."

"But I don't want to be that," protested Aggy, "I want to live a quiet life drifting on a boat with Jiffy, and maybe be a pilot twice a week like Milli."

"You can do all that. Being the Voice isn't a full-time job, or even a part-time job. It's just an occasional gig when the occasion arises. We just need someone smart, who is unafraid, able to think on their feet, and brimming with confidence."

"But I am none of those things!"

"Not yet maybe, but if you continue to connect with the Consensus, you will be soon," her Mum hugged her, "and then we'll get a luxury timeshare in the Poconos!"

Russell and Jen packed their suitcases as the excitement bubbled up inside them. Their first vacation in years, without the kids, who were more than happy to miss school and stay with their grandparents in Malibu. They were finally going on the adventure they'd talked about since they met. The car pulled up outside and they trundled their cases down the path to meet it.

Half-an-hour later, Russell was ashamed to admit he'd never been to the wrong side of the valley before but was intrigued by its dilapidated charm.

"Are you sure we're in the right place?" the driver asked as he stopped outside a mall, "this place is Mungo central."

Jen rolled her eyes and was about to say something when Russell pulled her out. Waiting for them, next to the East entrance, were Tiggy, Zooey and Dora, who'd swapped her orange knitted ensemble for a garish Hawaiian shirt and flip-flops. Also waiting were a bunch of security guards trying to bar the entrance, but there were so many Conduits flooding into the Mall, that they couldn't stem the flow.

Nova watched the screens as the Conduits walked into the Mall. Betty could Feel the fury boiling up inside her mother/boss/captor so decided to go inside. She went to her room and put on her Walkman.

Russell and Jen followed their friends into the basement of the mall. Many others of their Kind, some of whom Russell knew from Earth Almighty, were also crowding into the cineplex. These people seemed to know where they were going, so they just followed along. Emerging from a cinema into a train station platform with an old wood-paneled train was something even Russell, with his giant imagination, has not foreseen.

There was a real holiday spirit about the scene, as many Conduits had dressed for the destination's weather (balmy), brought presents of flip-flops and crocs for their mums, and felt a real sense of freedom in suddenly realizing that they could actually go home whenever they wanted.

Russell saw the Conductor, standing head and shoulders above his passengers, smiling and helping everyone aboard. When it was Russell's turn, the Conductor did a double-take.

"Are you also taking a vacation?" he asked as he swung their bags into the compartment.

"We are," said Jen, as she climbed on board, "it's our first-ever, in foreign climes."

"Well, dear fellow humans, you are trailblazers! I've never had any of my kind travel so far afield. Let me help these friends on to the train then I'll find you, okay?"

By the time the train was due to leave it was standing room only. Luckily, all left on the platform had come to wave people off. The Conductor, ever the showman, blew his whistle and cried "Let's get this show on the road!", then jumped on last.

Nova was seething. She picked up her phone and found a contact, the Conductor, and pressed Call.

The Conductor saw it was Nova calling, and answered,

"Hello Ma'am, how can I help you?"

"Stop the train! Don't let . . . "

The Conductor guessed what this was about and said,

"Sorry Ma'am, you're breaking up. Now I know a lot of people say this, but I really am going into a tunnel."

Nova threw her phone across the deck and shouted to Betty,

"Call the chopper!"

Betty called for the helicopter, as Nova paced the deck, throwing pot plants over the side. Betty knew the response was bad, and feared she would also be thrown over,

"It'll be here, on the deck, in two hours."

Nova seemed to be considering her options, but finally said,

"Fuck it! I'll use my scroll."

The train was indeed soon in the tunnel, traveling East under the city towards the desert.

Russell had been recognized by some fellow travelers and was being quizzed about Shandling's Castle and its hiatus.

"It's mainly to show solidarity with you guys. To show the 'powers-that-be' that they need us, more than we need them."

On Zooey's suggestion, they had all brought family-size bags of peanut M&Ms with them. Their party trick was letting everyone take one then getting them to touch Jen's skin while they all popped them into their mouths simultaneously. The rapturous reactions to tasting the candy properly for the first time was hilarious.

Russell went to find the restroom and bumped into the Conductor, who invited him to come to his office where he had his own privy.

"So, you're gonna be the first man to step on to another world. Isn't that amazing?"

Russell agreed,

"It is! I can't believe I didn't have to ask anyone's permission or fill out a thousand forms or anything."

The Conductor nodded slowly,

"Well, it's always been very laid back, because we knew we needed as many fine, talented people as we could get, and because they were meant to be secret, no records were kept, and no rules were made. In hindsight, we probably should have made a little more effort."

"And now they're going home."

"Well, yes," the Conductor agreed, "but excitedly, not like Aggy who looked so defeated and depressed." He looked out at the packed carriage of smiling faces, "do you think any will return?"

"Sure, if their demands are met."

"And what are they?"

"Not being sent to the frontline," Russell said, "plus the usual things the exploited want."

"And can you see Nova agreeing to these terms?"

Russell shook his head, then asked,

"Can you?"

The Conductor looked bleak, then changed the subject,

"So, what are you gonna do on your vacation?"

"Well, according to Tiggy and Zooey, it's the most boring place in the universe, so I plan to eat and walk a lot and, much to my wife's displeasure, write some new stories in between. I have brought two reams of paper and my trusty Smith Corona, as, according to the girls our devices will not work there."

"I've always wanted one of those," enthused the Conductor, "I can't get along with a laptop." Russell agreed,

"Absolutely."

"Hey," the Conductor asked, "want to share my lunch with me?"

He really was the kindest man on Earth . . . maybe the universe.

Jen sat in the train with her new friends and let the experience wash over her. She was with a trainload of alien beings, all going on vacation together, and soon they'd be on a spaceship ricocheting across the universe to another planet. And she wouldn't be able to tell a soul . . .

Still, she'd always know she was the first woman to leave this pathetic solar system, be the first human to visit another world. Maybe she wouldn't want to come back?

Jen was already missing her Earth Almighty gambling app and knew her supply of benzos would run out soon, but felt confident that she'd be able to let go once she accepted that they were out of reach.

When the train emerged from the tunnel, the sunlight almost burnt Russell's retinas.

When his eyes readjusted, he saw they really were in the desert, as promised. Jen opened a window and stuck her head out, then quickly retreated and closed the window,

"It's like having a hair dryer blowing in your face."

The train slowed and pulled into the station. The Liner, hidden in its cloud, was a few minutes away on the horizon, so the Conductor instructed everyone to remain on board, in the comfort of the aircon.

He saw Nova waiting on the platform. He suddenly felt guilty for having pretended not to hear her on the phone and was loathe to get out and greet her. But he had to. He did so and felt an overwhelming shame. She said nothing. Just looked at him. He felt his knees go weak. She sneered. He fell onto his knees.

"Why did you do that?" she asked.

"I'm sorry, I just got caught up in the moment."

"You're *that* malleable?"

He said nothing. His mind was blank, but for the shame of betraying his mistress.

"Then send this train back to L.A immediately."

He nodded and was about to say something when Russell got off the train,

"What's going on?"

"Go back inside," ordered Nova, "this does not concern you."

Russell had a momentary desire to go back inside, but he fought against it, going over to his new friend and asking,

"Hey man, did you trip? Here, let me help you up."

The Conductor looked up at him and smiled.

"Good," said Nova, "you help him up then get back on the train and go back to L.A."

It seemed like a good idea to both of them, but the Liner had silently slid up behind them and the dry air was imbued with the cold, moist vapor.

The holidaymakers flooded off the train and excitedly ran to the Liner, but many, including Tiggy and Zooey, stopped on the platform, to enquire after their human friends,

"What are you doing?" asked Tiggy of Nova. She could feel some indecipherable signal coming from the Taller woman. She took Russell's hand, who immediately looked wide awake. Zooey took the Conductors and led him away from Nova, who seethed and spat in a language they didn't understand. The four of them retreated into a crowd of their own Kind and felt a warm reassurance flow over them.

"Do you want to come with us?" asked Zooey, "it'll be an adventure."

"The universe's most boring, monotonous adventure," corrected Tiggy, "but still an adventure."

The Conductor held Zooey's hand tightly, while sneaking peeks at Nova intermittently,

"No thank you," he said, smiling, "I have my family to get back to."

Zooey nodded and they took the Conductor back inside the carriage, then rang the bell and the driver started the train. Once it was safely back in the tunnel, they moved towards the Liner in a little huddle, never taking their eyes off the seething Nova, still wringing her hands and swearing in her own language.

The Conductor felt a weight lift off him as the train was engulfed in darkness. Nova was more powerful than he imagined. He'd always seen her with an entourage before and had unconsciously accepted that her power came from the muscle surrounding her. But she'd been there alone, and had bent both Russell and him to her will, which was quite traumatizing. He put the kettle on and sat down to wait for it to boil. This brought to mind many questions including 'had he made the correct career choice all those years ago?'

The ship was nothing like Jen had imagined (something like a crappy, economy class, 737max where they'd be herded aboard and strapped in for the duration). It was more like being on a Caribbean Cruise than a spaceship, with a vaulted ceiling not unlike the Duomo in Florence. No violent launch, just a gentle swaying as it rose into space. Everyone sat around in spacious halls with wooden paneling like the train. In fact, everything was wood: the furniture, their cabins, the staircases, everything. Apparently, these ships had been running for thousands of years, delivering their national product, the Bjork Nut, around the universe, and had only been converted into Liners recently.

Various halls were playing music, or old movies (now with added Feels), and even reruns of Shandling's Castle. Russell spent a while in there until his own self-criticism drove him back to the Beatles Disco. It was difficult to know how long they were on board, two days maybe?

Tiggy and Zooey never left their room the whole journey, until the Liner was about to slow. They came to take Jen to the viewing platform, and everyone counted down to the moment when it wasn't going to be just black outside. Like fireworks, stars burst into light and the big wheel of the galaxy they were entering encircled them with a thousand trillion stars. Ahead was their own Star, and they could just spy the little orange planet that they called home.

When the big ramp was lowered, Jen could smell a new world. Russell started to descend but Jen took his hand and held him back. The kids disembarked around them until Jen and her man were the only ones left on board. She really wanted to be the first human being to step on a new planet. She let go of his hand and shouted, "Race you!"

Russell was completely taken by surprise but didn't mind being *just* the second human to step on a new planet. Mind you, he got a much bigger cheer from all the Shandling's Castle fans who'd come to greet him.

Everyone wanted to touch him and Feel the creative energy, but Tiggy and Zooey deemed it too dangerous, after witnessing Dora passing out. Zooey held Russell's hand (making her eyes roll back in their sockets again), then Tiggy took her hand, which gave her a real kick, then she let volunteers touch her fingers with various reactions, but mostly it was hysterical laughter.

Nova lay on her lounge, next to the pool, hugging her scroll. While her mistress was elsewhere, Betty took the opportunity to do some laps.

The Taller convened at RajaJamaDingDong, a plush, mountain-top hotel in the Himalayas, where they could watch a major battle between the Blues and the Yellows in action. Every explosion elicited a tingle of excitement from them, or a short round of applause.

Nova opened her eyes and found herself sitting in a cloakroom. Their scrolls always tried to transport them somewhere private, as it was considered bad etiquette to suddenly appear among your group, and startle them. Nova didn't give a shit about that, in fact, it would have been preferable. It would be a show of superiority - like always arriving last. She opened the cloakroom door with a flourish and strode into the room, greeting everyone with a wave.

The main topic of conversation was the walkout by the Hollywood Conduits.

Gordo was angry about it,

"Them finding about the idea to send them to the frontline was a big mistake, Nova."

"I said no to the General immediately," countered Nova, "maybe it was Franco Z, at War & Gore? His Conduit might have overheard him? That Cherry is a sneaky little bitch!"

Magga laughed,

"Then why didn't you tell them you'd said no to the idea?"

"Because they're a bunch of fucking banjos and don't deserve my time of day!"

No one responded. When Sona got angry, it was best to wait for the steam to stop emanating from her ears.

Finally, Gordo spoke,

"But that's not all they want now. They want more money."

"They're making a point. Aren't things in Hollywood grinding to a halt without them, Nova?" said Forko, "Shandling's Castle has shut down—"

"It's on hiatus Forko!"

Forko didn't back down,

"They know we need them. They know we cannot function without them."

Nova dismissed his defeatist attitude,

"Of course we can function without them! We were making a fortune on the music way before we discovered the Conduits!"

"It was chicken feed compared to what we make now," said Magga, "I, for one, do not want to return to those days of penury."

Many of the Taller nodded in agreement. Sona was most hurt by her best friend's betrayal.

"We're going to have to pay them a fair wage. We make trillions off their efforts. What did we even do—"

"We spotted their potential and marketed it!" bellowed Nova.

"And that's worth ninety-eight per-cent of the profits? We'll have nothing if they don't come back—"

"Then we'll go and get them. Make them return!" screamed Nova, "Sona, want to come? Relive old times?"

Sona shook his head,

"I can't. Too much on at the moment."

"Magga?"

But she shook her head. Nova seethed inwardly, gritting her teeth,

“Okay, as usual it's down to me to fix everything. I shall go and I shall persuade them to return, one way or another.”

“You’re not doing us a favor Nova. You are C.E.O of the Hollywood division,” sneered Gordo, “no one else’s Conduits have done a walk-out.”

They all watched her stride from the room.

Nova opened her eyes, put down her scroll, then looked around for Betty, who was drying herself off.

"Email the Spaceport where that Aggy girl landed and tell them we're coming. I have that thing with the President tomorrow so we must be ready to leave the next day."

"We?"

"Of course! I'll need an interpreter."

Betty watched Nova stride inside, then let a smile spread across her face.

Heidi looked down at her hands,

"I think I've broken you, James.

James turned from the pinball machine, and looked at her, sitting on the bed,

"What do you mean?"

Heidi avoided his gaze,

"You're not writing anymore?"

He shrugged,

"I don't feel the need."

"You've lost your spark," she said, not meaning to sound accusatory, "or, more accurately, I've robbed you of your spark."

"What do you mean?"

"I've started to write poetry. They're not very good, but I'm getting to understand the process and what's -- "

"You robbed me?"

Heidi nodded,

"I . . . er . . . I tried to ease your pain over Jo's death, by extracting it from you and absorbing it into myself, but I seem to have extracted and absorbed your creativity as well."

James stood there, taking in all that that implied. He would no longer be writing, and thus he would no longer be earning. So, soon he would be a busboy again. Should he be angry with Heidi? He didn't feel it. In fact, he didn't feel much of anything.

"So," said Heidi, as she picked up her overnight bag, "I'm leaving you."

James frowned, but said nothing as she walked out.

Russell and Jen had become celebrities during their sojourn on a planet that didn't have a name, apparently. Some of the kids dared each other to touch Russell's skin and feel the power of his imagination, but quickly it got old, and they were left alone. They were staying in a newly

renovated, retired Tree near Dora's and, every day, they wandered along the river which flowed from the cloud-covered peaks they could see on the horizon, to a café in another Tree very similar to their own. Jen's benzo withdrawal made her feel awful on occasion, her every nerve ending firing pins and needles into her skin, but exercise helped as did the warmth from the star.

While Jen starbathed, Russell typed page after page on his trusty Smith Corona. He'd already finished revising his script and now the book he'd been fermenting for a decade poured out of him fully formed. His only worry was that he hadn't bought enough paper.

In the evening, if Jen felt well enough, they'd visit Dora, Tiggy and Zooey, then maybe go eat. They were all sitting around the table and Tiggy and Zooey were, as usual, all over each other when Dora asked,

"Where did you two meet?"

Russell said,

"Oooh, can I tell this one please?" he stood up, a little drunk from the wine, "it is a really romantic one." He sat back down, feeling a bit dizzy,

"It was at the studio. I was casting the young lovers, and I'd got the impression that Tamsin and Tom quite fancied each other. It was shy glances across the room, little smiles, that kind of thing. So I got them into read together and they were blushing and getting flustered and were so cute together that I knew I could make it work between them. And then, of course, I needed to find their Conduits, and I thought it would be best if I found two new girls, who had no previous Feelings instilled in them. So we called a bunch of them in, and I watched them all crammed into the waiting room, and I immediately noticed these two, and got the impression that they quite fancied each other. It was the same shy glances across the room, the same shy little

smiles, that kind of thing. So I asked them in to read together, and they were blushing just like the actors and getting flustered and were so cute together that I knew they would be perfect together. And they've hardly taken their hands off each other ever since . . . “

Dora smiled, happy for her daughter.

On the walk home, Russell and Jen lay in the grass and stared at the galaxy whirling above them, marveling at its beauty.

“You couldn't make it up, could you?”

Jen laughed,

“That's funny, coming from you.”

Betty paced her cramped quarters on Nova's cruiser. Or 'tried' to pace. It was more like she was walking on a tiny circle. Her cabin was smaller than her mistresses Echo Chamber, in which she was currently sleeping.

She tried to decide how to play it. Should she be the adorable toddler, the inquisitive child, the rebellious teen or the adult of equal status? She'd been through all these stages with Nova, who had actually been a reasonable parent, until Betty had come of age, when then, she'd not always been treated as an adult of equal status. It wildly veered between that and serf.

Betty walked along the landing and peered through the port-hole to see if she was awake yet. Inside the Chamber she could see the dancing pink and purple Echoes snaking, swooping and looping around Nova, before finally flowing into her open mouth. Betty always wondered about the Echoes, what they were really doing. No, she believed Nova when she said they were revitalizing her, but she did wonder where the cannisters of revitalizing Echoes came from. The

Tallers' home planet? Nova had never spoken of her original home to Betty. Maybe it was boring like her own was, apparently. Maybe Nova's was a planet of accountants, doing the books of more exciting planets nearby. The Taller were all obsessed with the bottom line, the profit margins, and smart investments, and were notoriously cheap. Nova would happily pay a king's ransom for her Deck to be expanded to the size of a football pitch, but wouldn't spring for Betty to get her car serviced.

She got a drink and sat in the enormous co-pilot's seat, staring out the window at the vanta-blackness. Sooooo boring. She'd already done her entire puzzle book and today's Wordle. She put on some music: Vivaldi's Four Seasons and closed her eyes and thought of her Mum. She could hardly visualize her, but she remembered being loved. Being held. She imagined being cradled in her arms and falling into a deep sleep . . .

Betty was awoken when the music stopped. Stopped specifically by Nova who didn't really understand music. She had understood that she could exploit it because other races might understand it and love it. But she never really got it. In that way she was more like the Unfeeling in as much as she needed the Feels to be really appreciating the experience.

"What was that?" she asked.

"Vivaldi. He predated Mozart by nearly one-hundred-years and . . ." Betty tailed off. As she lowered herself into the pilot's seat, Nova was making the universally recognized hand gesture for wanking.

"Sorry I asked."

Betty thought she'd try a joke to lighten Nova's mood:

"Are we there yet?"

Well, at least Nova didn't bite her head off,

"Not a good sleep I take it?"

"No, the Echoes are weak; poor quality."

"What are the Echoes?"

"They are a completely organic, paraben free, revitalizing ionic serum."

"And where do they come from?"

"Betty? You recall in horror stories when a character says, 'you really don't want to know'? Well, you really don't want to know."

"You mean they're tested on animals?" Betty asked, horrified, "or extracted from animals?"

Nova hummed and tipped her head left and right,

"You could say that . . ."

While she didn't seem to be in a vile mood Betty thought she might just push her luck a little further,

"Is my Kind the reason for the unending war? So we can all say we're immigrants from the other side?"

Nova actually laughed,

"Haha, no, it's just a happy coincidence."

Betty found that answer confusing,

"But you did start the wars?"

Nova nodded and smiled wistfully,

"Yes, war is good for us and the economy."

None the wiser, Betty tried to get her head round what Nova had said. 'It was just a happy coincidence'?

Jen and Russell were with their new friends in a brasserie overlooking the river. The sunset over the golden trees was yet another magic-hour. Russell was hungry after a long day typing his book. Jen was tired, but happy to be out.

As with most of their Kind, they were intrigued by Russell, and talk often turned to the creative media. Dora said,

"Sure, our Kind have been around for longer than any of us can comprehend, but I've been alive long enough to have known this world before the Beatles. And then After the Beatles, which is, so far, but a brief moment in our long history."

Dora's sister added,

"You grew up surrounded by music and TV and Movies so maybe you take it for granted a little? But for us, it was a revelation! We had no idea we could be stirred in such a way, emotionally, spiritually and physically."

Another said,

"I still remember that day, twenty years ago, when a Taller woman landed and put headphones on me and my friend. She played us Abbey Road, and we were smitten. She was so happy when I said I wanted to play it to my friends, but became confused when I just got into my Tree and sat there with my eyes shut. But she soon understood our special talents when I told her we'd like to barter a million Walkmans as soon as possible."

Russell was weirded out, because no one around the table was actually talking, but he was receiving all their words with utter clarity.

"Every medium you've created has imbued us with new qualities, which, because it's only been fifteen years, we have no idea how it's affecting us in the long-term. There are many positives for me personally, like dancing, alone and at parties, deeper meditation while listening to Johan Johansson, reduced boredom while doing repetitive tasks . . ."

"Reduced boredom?" Edie said, "but we never knew what boredom was before the Beatles, we had to steal your English word for it." she said, looking straight at Russell.

"Absolutely Edie," agreed Dora, "we've noticed a few worrying changes: Has our attention span shortened? Do we spend less time in Arbor so we can watch Frasier reruns? Do we gossip about Shandling's Castle more than talk about spiritual matters? Is my Walkman more treasured than my wedding band?"

"A lot of us, as individuals, would answer yes to those questions."

"We've been exporting our Bjork nuts for hundreds of millennia, and almost as long resisting 'Progress', Missionaries, Invaders, Capitalists, and Jehovah's Witnesses but we couldn't resist this. It was overwhelming and we were unanimous in our love."

Someone else took up the story,

"So we allowed the Taller to build the beacons to receive the media."

"The glass and steel structures at our Spaceports."

"But that was it, we said. We'd made a concession for our new addiction, but we'd only lost six hundred Trees in all."

"Before that though, a diplomatic incident happened with the Taller, which should have been a wakeup call to us all, but we let it slide because we were all so enraptured by the music and movies, and our whole world has never been the same since."

Jen was intrigued, but didn't want to break their flow by asking for more details. And also, she loved their 'voices', they were soothing and distracting her from the creepy-crawly feeling under her skin.

"We cannot put the Beatles back in the box, and we don't think any of us would want to. But using our Kind to distill your human Feels might be a step too far." Russell understood. There were some things on Earth that were a step too far, and he hoped there was still time to put them back in the box.

Tiggy and Zooey had lost interest in the old people's discussion and wanted to change the subject:

"Russell, please tell us a story?" said Tiggy.

"In fact, can you tell us *all* a story?" asked Zooey, "Why not come and sit in that Tree with me and we can live-stream to the Consensus?"

Russell thought for a moment, then nodded, and Zooey ran to the Tree.

Dora's sister took Jen's hand,

"You're not well are you?"

Jen shook her head,

"A little withdrawal problem . . . "

"I know, come here."

She took Jen in her arms and held her hands. Jen smiled, instantly feeling a bit better. She waved to Russell as he climbed into the Tree.

Zooey spoke in the style of a Talk Show host,

“We have a very special guest for you this evening. I’m sure you know the creator and writer of Shandling’s Castle came home with us, and he is sitting with me now, and I’m about to take his hand so he can communicate to however many billions of us are connected right now.”

Russell’s bushy eyebrows raised as he took the number in. But Zooey took his hand, and he found it calming.

“Hi Russell, you are live, no swearing please,” she said, sniggering.

Russell laughed then replied,

“Hi Zooey, hi everyone, thanks for having me, and because we’re pre-watershed, I’ve got a story from my childhood that I hope you may like, okay?”

“When I was young, we lived in a wooden house on the river. Now, when I say on the river, I mean ON the river. The house was built on stilts and all we had joining us to the riverbank was a rope bridge; and boats of course; we spent most of our lives in boats. The ribbon of riverbank was a public footpath, so the opposite bank was our playground, and Dad’s workplace. There, Dad had a quay with a big crane.

At high tide, steamers would arrive, and Dad would unload their cargo with the crane. More often than not it was coal. Big clouds of dust would stain everything black, including us. Us? Me (Ant, eight); Suzi, seven; and Emmy, four-and-three-quarters. When we got home, covered in coal-dust, Mum would always be mad, but we’d just have a bath and be clean again.

Mum liked everything to be clean. So did Sophie (or Soapie, as we called her. She was Suzi's twin but they couldn't be more different). She was always complaining about us. Anyway, Dad would bag up the coal, then he'd deliver it in the van, sometimes really late. Sometimes, in the school holidays, he'd take us with him. On the way home we might stop and watch the foxes. Sometimes we'd even see a badger. It would get so late that we wouldn't want to wake Mum or Soapie (especially Soapie), so we'd stay in Dad's cottage on the quay, and spend the night barbequing sausages, spotting stars and splashing the phosphorus.

One weekend at the height of summer, a spring tide was forecast. High tide wasn't until midnight, and Dad was expecting a boat.

We pleaded with Mum to let us stay up. She was okay about it, as long as we had a bath in the cottage before we came home. She and Soapie were going to watch something on satellite anyway.

On the quay, there was a magical shimmering light from the full moon. We could almost feel its gravity, sucking the water towards it. The water rose faster and higher than we'd ever seen it. It actually came over the top of the quay and was getting really close to the underside of our wooden house. We tried to phone and radio them but couldn't get through. Ominously, that was the moment that the moon was obscured by clouds, and it started to rain heavily.

The radio crackled into life and we all jumped with surprise, but it was only the Captain of the steamer, saying he would be early, due to the powerful tide.

With the steamer came even heavier rain. Dad started the crane, and we forgot about the water, as we sat thirty feet above it, each taking turns on the levers. Below us, we could see the water

higher than ever before. The steamer was almost directly under the crane, way over the edge of the quay, bumping against the coal pile.

It wasn't until halfway through the unloading that we heard from Mum on the radio. She said the basement was springing leaks all over and the water was about to come in the windows.

'Get out now!' shouted Dad.

'Okay,' said Mum, 'I'll just collect a few things.'

'No, get out now!' he shouted, but she'd hung up.

Emmy cried out and pointed across the river. Horrified, we watched the house about to be engulfed, but then we heard an almighty wrenching sound as it detached itself from its legs and bobbed to the surface. Mum squeaked something down the radio as the house whirled round in the spring current. Dad was out of the crane and into the boat before we even noticed. But before he was halfway across, a strange thing happened: As fast and as strong as the tide had been coming in, it had suddenly turned, and the house was now being pulled towards the sea.

Over the radio, the steamer Captain tried to calm my Mum, then told us to come aboard. I carried Emmy down the ladder and Suzi followed and we leapt aboard, setting off downstream. I worked the spotlight as we looked for Dad's boat in the rain. We didn't find him, but we couldn't mistake the house. It loomed ahead of us, through the rain and mist.

'Do you think Teddy Robinson is alright?' asked Emmy.

'Don't worry' I said, 'I'm sure he'll be fine...'

We pulled alongside and looked for them through the windows, but there was no one to be seen.

'They've drowned!' cried Suzi.

'No, look!' I shouted as a flare shot up.

In the binoculars we could see three figures in the small boat: Dad, Mum & Soapie. The little outboard motor was fighting the tide to make it back to us.

'They seem okay' said the Captain, 'So what shall we do with the house kids? Run it aground? or—'

'Take it back!' we all shouted as one. We slung some lines through the railing supports and then very slowly the captain tried to slow the house's drift.

It was a long slog back, but when Dad, Mum and Soapie got on board, there was a lot of hugging (especially the twins which was a very weird sight), then it was soup and toast and a singsong round the stovepipe. Emmy was still concerned about Teddy Robinson, but we reassured her that he was bound to be caring for the other cuddlies on her bed where she left him. It stopped raining and we went on deck to watch the bizarre sight of our house following us upriver.

But to our horror we saw that the water was now coming in the basement windows and the house was slowly sinking. We stood dumbstruck as the basement rooms sank out of sight. The steamer slowed as the ropes tugged on the stern.

'I fear it's going down,' shouted the Captain, 'we may have to let it go.'

Then, the living rooms were gone and the steamer was dragged backwards and downwards and water flooded the stern deck. As the bedroom windows started taking in water the Captain cried, 'Cut the lines! or we'll all go under!'

Knee-deep in water, me and Dad chopped at the thick ropes, while all my sister could say was: 'Teddy Robinson . . . Teddy Robinson . . .'

Finally we were free and the steamer righted itself.

All that was left visible of the house was the flagpole, and we stood there for a while as small pieces of furniture and our belongings bobbed to the surface.

My little sister peered over the stern shouting for her teddy.

Mum pulled her back and hugged her: ‘Everything’s gone Darling...’

‘No!’ squeaked my sister ‘there he is!’

To everyone’s delight my Mum fished Teddy out and my sis squeezed her sodden loved one to her chest.

Dad hugged Mum; ‘I’m sorry Sweetheart’

But she smiled; ‘Not to worry, we got back the only irreplaceable thing.’

So what happened to us?

We all moved into Dad’s cottage!

and what about the coal dust, you ask?

Oh, Mum got used to it!”

Russell stopped, quite exhausted by his efforts, as was Zooey from transmitting his voice and his Feels, but the response was phenomenal. Even Russell could Feel the positive vibrations coming back through Zooey’s hand.

Zooey caught some questions coming through, from some of the younger children:

“What are Tides?”, “What is Teddy Robinson?” and “What is Coal?” were the most common ones. Russell smiled and shrugged,

“What are tides? Well, first I need to explain to you about our Moon . . . I guess we’re in for a long night.”

Zooey had loved holding hands with Russell and live-streaming his words and Feels.

"You know, Russell? The reaction we got from everyone, I think there could be a market for that, obviously. But also just live-streaming your thoughts and Feels when you're in a completely different scenario, like when you're directing Shandling's Castle, or when you're editing? I mean I found it fascinating just listening in on your thoughts while you were composing your sentences before you actually said them out loud."

"So you're suggesting we just walk around holding hands all day?"

Zooey frowned,

"Well now you're just making it sound creepy."

Russell smiled,

"Well I certainly enjoyed telling that story. Should we do another one? I've got plenty and a few that would work for after the watershed?"

"After the reception you got tonight, I know everyone would love it."

Chapter Six

After much debate about live streaming versus going to support Aggy, Tiggy and Zooey had decided to go visit their friend down south of them, to check in with her and give her a big hug. Plus it would be warmer, and they'd be able to swim and starbathe.

It was ten days by boat or a day and a half by rail, so they bought tickets for the train. When it arrived at their station, it was primarily a goods train, collecting Bjorks as it went, but there was one passenger carriage right at the back, which had no one else in it. They boarded, put their bags in a cabin, then jumped into bed.

Aggy was there to meet them, waving excitedly, and they jumped off and hugged her before the train had stopped.

On the walk to her Mum's place, Aggy sheepishly told them about her budding romance with Jiffy, and what her Mum had said about the Consensus wanting Aggy as their Voice.

"Wow!" said Zooey, "I didn't see that coming! The last one was about 200 years old, wasn't she?"

"Yeah," agreed Aggy, "she had gravitas in spades, didn't she?"

"Well maybe they're looking to go a different way?" suggested Tiggy, "have someone who's been to Earth and knows its foibles and dark underbelly."

"Which you do, unfortunately for you," said Zooey, "but also they want an original thinker, I mean, come on, no one else had thought of just walking away, had they? Even though we now know a lot of them weren't happy."

Tiggy nodded,

"I don't know why we keep talking about the Consensus as 'they'. We've been at a lot of Circles since we got back, and we've been voting for you to be the Voice too."

Aggy was shocked, then laughed along with them. Zooey put an arm around her shoulders and asked,

"So when are we going to meet your new beau, Aggy?"

Her Mum called her,

"You need to hear this Aggy. The Consensus has spoken."

Nova's little cruiser descended towards the Spaceport. Betty scanned the unbreaking landscape of golden Trees sat atop a diamond lattice of rivers, reminding her of a Christmas decoration on Earth. She hadn't been back to her home planet since she was a child.

Nova looked angry as she landed the craft,

"There's no delegation or red carpet. You did email them didn't you Betty?"

"Yes, but I got no reply, and you know it's going to be hard to negotiate with them as there's no leader. All decisions are made by the Consensus."

They hopped down onto the tarmac.

"I can't Feel anything or anyone," Betty said, "except for the crew loading the Cargo Ships. And I can't Feel the Consensus, but I guess that's because we're so far from the Trees. This port is ten times larger than when I left, and this steel structure—."

"All in the name of Progress," said Nova, then she searched Betty's face for some emotion, "Is this weird for you?"

"Maybe, a bit. But it's a distant memory now, and I've been disconnected from the Consensus for so long I probably wouldn't even recognize it—"

"But then how are we going to communicate with them? We need this sorted Betty!"

"I know, I know . . . I guess we should walk out of the Spaceport and into the Trees . . . "

"I'm not going out there," said Nova, "fucking savages. You know one bit me when I saved you?"

"That was my mother. You weren't saving me."

Nova looked down on her Conduit as they walked into the empty Terminal,

"After all I've done for you. I freed you from this boring, monotonous, planet and made you a celebrity on Earth! The original Conduit! The one who added the Feels to our inaugural transmissions for the Unfeeling."

Betty stamped her foot,

"The one who opened the doors for you and the Taller to become richer than Croesus!" cried Betty, pirouetting under the glass and steel dome, "the one who inadvertently attracted thousands of my Kind to come to Earth with that advert you shot of me saying 'focussing on the Feels of a Human is the most beautiful experience of my life,' when I was ten!"

Her voice echoed around the glass dome, while Nova examined a Beatles T-shirt on a rack.

"The one who was treated like a Lab Rat while you worked on extracting the Feels from me and digitizing them for broadcast."

Nova looked anywhere but at Betty. Outside, a Liner landed silently and disgorged its passengers, who all headed straight for the station.

"What's got into you Betty? You're never like this."

"It's being here. It's brought up a lot of resentments I've had buried for years. You haven't treated me well, and you haven't treated my Kind well either," she gestured at the kids outside, "and now the Consensus has decided to bring their girls home . . . "

Nova stooped over Betty, hissing in her face,

"I could use force. Invade and enslave these Banjos! There's a lot at stake here." Betty didn't flinch.

A girl wearing skinny black jeans and a blue zipped hoodie walked into the Terminal. Following a few meters behind her were a pair of girls who were holding hands and looked almost identical. Behind them was a chain of teenagers holding hands, that stretched out the doors and into the distance.

The Girl in the hoodie approached the odd couple,

"Hi, I'm Aggy."

"You are the one who came back. I can Feel it," said Betty.

"I am. And you are Betty, the first of our Kind to leave this planet. It's an honor to meet you."

"So why did you leave Earth?" asked Nova.

"I didn't like how I and my Kind were treated. We were exploited, ghettoized and shunned by society, and even though we were of great value to your business, you did nothing to help us."

"So you went whining to the Consensus and one opinion can ruin the whole setup for everyone!"

"Ruin it for you, you mean?"

"There's three trillion Unfeeling across the Universe who won't be getting their Feels because you weren't happy!"

"It wasn't the Consensus, it was individual mothers who decided they didn't like my description of the setup on Earth so kept their daughters at home, and others who emailed them to return, or who went to retrieve them," Aggy smiled, "so I guess that is a consensus, just not with a capital C."

"Then I shall invade and take what I want," shouted Nova, "you'll be helpless against me and my forces. I shall enslave your Kind and use them how I like."

Aggy gestured to the closest teen who came and took her hand and Aggy was connected to the Consensus,

"Your Mum says Hi, can you Feel her Betty?"

Betty didn't move, except for her eyes widening and her head nodding imperceptibly.

"Take my hand Betty, and you'll be able to talk to her."

Nova jumped between them,

"Don't you dare Betty!"

But then the teens encircled the three of them and closed in. Nova tried to beat them off but was outnumbered. She flailed her arms but unbalanced herself and fell, unable to get back up as the teens closed around her.

Betty was connected to her Mum:

"I'm coming for you baby. They won't let her take you away from me twice." Betty sobbed into Aggy's hoodie while she felt her mother's love for the first time in ten years.

Nova raged from the floor, surrounded by bare, smelly feet, many of which were pressing against her head, arms and legs (for the Feels).

Aggy, still hugging Betty, said,

"The Consensus has declared me as their Voice, and They have demands." Aggy inhaled and seemed to grow:

"When we agreed to this, it was as an experiment. One that we now realize has failed. So we either bring our offspring home, or you have to accept our terms—"

Nova tried to muster some dignity and forced a laugh,

"Why would I agree to anything? We'll take what we want from this planet and farm you in concentration camps!"

She pressed a button on her cuff.

An awful rumbling came from the sky and the air rippled as battleships protruded into the atmosphere, their howitzers already blazing with terrible shrieks. The teenagers screamed and ran for cover, splitting the Consensus from Aggy and Betty, and Tiggy and Zooey who also ran. The battleships swam through the air with a shark-like hunger. They spotted the Arbors and community centers on the barrows and started firing on them. People fled into the forests, sheltering under Trees.

Alone, Nova got to her feet and theatrically dusted herself off. Triumphant, she watched the subjugation start, laughing like Cruella DeVile. One ship fired at the Terminal, blowing the roof out, and showering Nova in shards of broken glass. She barked into her cuff:

“Not at the Spaceports you fucking Martian!”

The Four ran to the forest on the edge of the Spaceport. They climbed into the nearest Tree and connected to the Consensus.

“Nova has brought attack ships with her!”

The reply came that it was happening everywhere.

“So what can we do?”

Concentrate! Everyone. Concentrate on the battleship above you!

Aggy clung to the tree that shuddered from a nearby impact. With eyes squeezed shut, and gritted teeth, she concentrated fully on the ship above her. She had an image of the crew, sitting at their stations, hands on various controls. Was this her imagination or something provided by the Consensus? Either way, she focussed on them and tried to follow what the rest of the Consensus was projecting. It was one word:

Freeze.

She was terrified by the shrieking of the ships, but she kept projecting.

Freeze.

Russell was amazed by the variety of foods that could be made out of the humble Bjork. Jen and he were sampling the various ice creams in the café, when there was a loud noise outside. The first loud noise they'd heard while on their holiday.

They ran outside and saw the massive ships forcing their way into the atmosphere, firing balls of fire at the trees.

“For fuck’s sake!” growled Russell, as he watched everyone else climb into the trees. Him and Jen ran too, but for the river, where they followed a lot of kids jumping into the water. They stood in the shallows, ready to duck, as they watched the sky burning. But then everything went quiet. The guns stopped firing, and the ships just hung there, as though their crew had just fallen asleep, hands dropping off the controls. The only sound was the gentle whirring of the electromagnetic turbines keeping the ships in the air. Then they slowly rose until they disappeared from the atmosphere.

Nova screamed at the sky as she realized she had lost (that round). She wasn’t used to losing. Her throat was sore by the time she became aware that the teenagers were back.

Aggy walked towards the tall woman and wasn't afraid anymore. Even without the Consensus bolstering her, she was confident. Tiggy, Zooey and the wary teens followed her at a distance, as did Betty, who Aggy has not seen for a while. Since the freezing, they'd needed to regroup and decide their response to Nova's action. None was the consensus. Negotiation was their way.

Nova stood still, in the center of the terminal surrounded by broken glass. She growled as she saw Aggy approach.

“Ready to try again?”

“How did you do that?” asked Nova.

“Unionization. Ready to try again?”

Nova nodded and the teenagers linked hands, joining Aggy to the Consensus.

She took a deep breath:

“Our Kind will never be sent to the frontline to record the Feels of dying men; We want the respect we deserve for the service we provide; you can't sell the Feels to the Unfeeling without us, so we will negotiate fair wages for all our Kind.”

Nova Felt an extraordinary warmth emanating from the little girl.

She thought for a moment then nodded,

“Okay, it's only fair. We've had a good run.”

She walked towards Aggy with her hand proffered. Aggy reached out to take it, but Nova grabbed her arm, swung her around and got her in a headlock in a second.

“Ready to try again?” asked Nova, with a chuckle.

Aggy hung in the air as Nova's grip tightened, cutting off the blood to her brain. Tiggy and Zooey ran forward but Nova pulled harder on Aggy's neck, so they faltered. The teenagers looked horrified as Aggy's face started turning the same colour as her hoodie. Nova swung her around, laughing.

But then she wasn't laughing. She was screaming and jerking and falling as Betty was stabbing her in the kidneys and the back of her legs. Aggy wrested herself away as Nova fell, and Betty started on her lungs, all the time screaming and stabbing and screaming and stabbing. Blood poured from the fallen woman as she sank,

"Why, Betty?"

"Why, Betty?" screamed Betty, "Why, Betty?" stabbed Betty, "if you have to ask you deserve another dozen, you supercilious freak!"

No one pulled her off. They all just stood and watched, until Betty had had enough and fell on to Nova's dead chest and cried.

Later, after Betty had cleaned up in the restroom and changed into an Abbey Road t-shirt, they all sat on the launchpad in a circle and exchanged. Betty shared that she'd had a lifetime of resentment built up against Nova and while the battleships had raged overhead, she couldn't resist searching the Cargo Ships for a weapon. The best she could find was a boxcutter, but it had done the job.

A Liner came into land silently nearby. The ramp swung down, and a little brown figure could be seen standing in the doorway. Betty Felt her Mummy's presence and ran to her. They hugged and exchanged and hugged some more, both promising to never let each other go again.

Aggy and the teenagers left them alone to reacquaint themselves, Aggy doing her now-famous party trick of feeling extraordinary human Feels. And, of course, it wasn't just the snake of kids who were Feeling it, it was the entire Consensus, who also squealed in delight.

Betty's Mum (Keri) wanted to see the infamous Nova. They walked to the door of the Terminal, but Betty didn't want to come in.

"You wait here Sweetheart, if you like. We'll still be able to see each other. Keri let go of her hand and walked over to the body. Betty had been systematic. This body was definitely dead. But she spotted movement in the blood pooling on the floor. She went to a souvenir stand and found a display of mason jars full of fudge. She opened one, ate a piece then poured out the rest.

Betty couldn't make out what her Mum was doing. Searching the body for something? Examining something in her blood?

Keri spotted a long tendrilous creature trying to escape from the coagulating blood. She used her handkerchief to drag it onto a dry piece of floor. The more it dried, the less it looked like microscopic seaweed and more like a shadow, or a black wisp of smoke. Once it was dry, she threw her hanky over it, caught it and shook it into the jar, then she sealed the lid. She could feel the shadow become angry, beating its tiny, ineffective fists on the indestructible glass. Keri smiled and waved at the tiny monster.

“Finally,” she said, “I’ve got you. I knew what you were when I bit you, as you took Betty from me.”

He held the jar up and into a ray of the Star.

“Make the most of this moment, you’ll never see any star again. But don’t worry, I’m not going to kill you. I’m just going to bury you alive, and you won’t perish for at least a thousand years. Long enough sentence, you think?”

Keri put the jar in her bag and walked to Betty.

“What have you got there Mum?” she asked as she looped her arm through her Mum’s.

“Just a souvenir of my trip to the Spaceport. Shall we go home?”

Chapter Seven

Sona was not happy. He sat in his office in London, waiting on Nova's call. But it never came. Finally, he gave up and got ready to leave. His PA, Sandy, was still at her desk. She was a sweet girl, he decided, who he hadn't found particularly attractive until this moment,

"Hey Sandy, you want to come for a drink with me? We could go to that new Mexican on South Bank and have tequila?"

Sandy smiled and nodded as she got her coat.

"You know Sandy," said Sona, as he held the door for her, "you're wasted as my PA. We're short staffed right now, so I'm thinking your talents would be better used recording the Feels, don't you think?"

Sandy nodded and smiled,

"Actually, I've just spent three years at the London School of Economics and am much more interested in your side of EA, if you don't mind?"

He seemed pleased by this response, and immediately launched into an enthralling report on Statistical Analysis. She'd heard some weird rumors about him, but she didn't listen to them. She was quite curious about the room behind his desk – the one containing his Echo Chamber . . .

Aggy and her brave, teenage compatriots returned to their homes after the dramatic events, and mostly found their Trees unharmed. Tiggy and Zooey walked along the river with Aggy to her Mum's place. They all hugged and Exchanged, then climbed up the nearest barrow to view the damage. Only maybe one-per-cent were on fire, another five-per-cent were a bit singed and

missing part of their leafy coat, but as it never rained it didn't matter so much. The Trees were very resilient. They'd seemed to work as shock absorbers for the people sheltering under them.

They went back to Alli's Tree, and she made them afternoon tea,

"Normally, I would be settling down to watch Shandling's Castle right now, but no. You kids have put paid to that!"

Tiggy and Zooey were initially taken aback, but then realized she was teasing them.

"She has a strange sense of humor," said Aggy, taking a slice of cake to go with her tea, "and however long you're around her, you'll never get used to it."

They stayed a few days in the warmed climate. They starbathed, messed around in boats with Aggy and her new friend Jiffy, but also spent time in the Trees with the Consensus. The main subject was, of course, Nova's visit/attack and their attempts to negotiate with her. So what to do? The majority wanted Aggy to go to Earth and negotiate, and even though Aggy didn't want to go, she couldn't think of a better option (other than sending someone else, which wasn't going to happen). Even though she had been a rebellious child and had jumped a Liner for Earth the moment she got the chance, Aggy still had the Consensus embedded deep in her heart and respected their decision: One Liner would visit Earth on a diplomatic mission to negotiate a new deal with Earth Almighty.

Tiggy and Zooey decided they'd stay with Aggy near the Spaceport, and they'd ask Russell and Jen to come down on the train.

Russell had finished his novel and was happy, satisfied and ready to start thinking about Shandling's Castle. Jen was feeling well rested and healed. She'd been spending an hour a day

with Edie who had helped her ease through the withdrawals from the benzos. She'd been regularly swimming and exercising with Russell, and she'd got a nice tan from starbathing. Plus, she was starting to miss the kids.

Russell had been telling stories every night through the network using Dora as his conduit. She loved it, and felt some of his brilliance had rubbed off on her. Maybe she had a story in her? About a hard-bitten detective, who didn't play by the rules, on the trail of a riverboat captain who'd left his wallet on the train. Hmm. Could do better. Neither murder, nor violence had ever happened on their planet. Maybe she should change the location to one of the planets they deliver the Bjorks to? Or Earth even? They seemed to be constantly killing each other there. What was that documentary series she liked, about that little place in New England called Cabbot's Cove, was it? It was surprising that there was anyone left at all, the murder was so rife, and why hadn't the rest of the locals moved away? Surely, with each death, their chances of being next increased? The information poster at the Spaceport should say, "Don't reveal our secret. The Humans are too busy creating, copulating and killing, to question where we come from".

Russell had got the message from Zooey, and they were happy to take the train the next day. It sounded like an adventure to round off their truly 'out-of-this-world' vacation (even though Zooey again impressed upon them how monotonous the view on the train would be).

"One last story then," said Russell to the Consensus, via Dora, "as advertised, it's one for the adults so get the kids to bed and we'll start in ten minutes.*"

Jen was fighting fit but still settled down with Edie for one last story-time, whereby Edie could all at once suck (what was left of) the poison from her body and imbue her with a physical and mental strength that she'd never known before.

*see appendix page 226

Heidi looked at her phone. Forty texts from James overnight. Some had some poetry in them, but it was more like something Dr Seuss would write, not James Faulkner

Aggy lay back on her bed and contemplated her future. She liked the idea of her and Jiffy floating downstream on a boat, intermittently mooring at five-star establishments to eat fine foods and drink euphoria inducing wines. Then, when at the equator, turn around, and watch Jiffy flex her muscles rowing upstream, intermittently mooring at five-star establishments to eat fine foods and drink euphoria inducing wines.

That was definitely at the top of her list. But she also wanted to start her restaurant on Earth where her Kind could eat great food while touching a Human who was eating the same thing. She would call it 'the Fish-Bulb' in honor of the Simpsons episode where Homer gets famous in Japan. Why? Why not? Why was 'Wagamama' called that? Why 'Mr Fogg's arterial excursion'? Why indeed. There were no rules on that crazy planet called Earth.

Earth was such an inappropriate name for the place. The word Earth suggested muted browns and greys, peaceful contemplations, grounded behavior and Earth was none of those things, unless you were in a monastery in Tibet. The name was much more suited to her own planet, the one that had no official name, though a lot of people called 'the planet of the Bjorks'.

Why had the Consensus never come up with a name for it? Because "we aren't creative"? The Consensus. She'd been trying to avoid thinking about them. Offering her the job as their Voice was ridiculous. She was not right for the job as unless she was actually sitting in her Tree, thus connected to the Consensus, she was shy, and weak, and a chicken.

She hunched her shoulders in defiance and plunged her fists into the pockets of her hoodie. One hand hit paper - the flyer from the Mall about unionization. The other hit the egg. The 'Egg'. The one with the orgasm she'd induced from Elena. She held it gingerly between thumb and forefinger, but Felt nothing. Maybe its battery was flat? That would be disappointing. The eggs were such clever tech. Not digital, like the transmissions sent across the universe via the hoppers, but kind of analogue, so the Feels could be transported in a handy format, and used at will.

She spun the egg between her fingers, tempted to have a Feel of it, but resisted. She had Jiffy now. Jiffy could induce in her a deep, deep pleasure. Just not the full-on, all-consuming, turned-up-to-eleven, megaton power of Elena in action.

Just once.

She squeezed the egg . . .

But nothing happened. It was working, but Elena had left the building. Embarrassed that she'd even tried, Aggy shut her eyes and waited for sleep.

The next morning, Aggy, all packed and ready to go back to Earth, sat in her Tree awaiting final instructions from the Consensus. There was a lot of mulling going on, like a soup being

unstirred. Aggy absent-mindedly toyed with the egg in her pocket, as decisions coalesced, and the Consensus started to focus on her.

The power of that focus took her by surprise as she Felt them imbuing her with their confidence and strength, but also their comfort and love. It was almost overwhelming. So much so, that she didn't notice herself gripping the egg, and it humming within her hand.

Finally, it was over. The message was clear. She knew what she had to do. She climbed down from the Tree and hugged her Mum.

"I'm very proud of you Agnëta," she said lovingly, "and while you're away I'm going to check out our new timeshare."

Aggy nodded and waved as she went to join her friends for the walk to the lane where Jiffy would give them a lift to the station.

"And you get Shandling's Castle back on the air as soon as, because it's that, or Husband's Night Out!"

Aggy cringed at her embarrassing mother.

"What's Husband's night out?" asked Tiggy, but Aggy just kept on walking.

The Conductor was glad of his vacation, his first in a few years. He had taken his partner to Hawaii, and they'd made many new friends, eaten and drank and body-surfed with dolphins. He'd never heard from Sona again, which was a relief.

Back in the desert for the first time, he waited excitedly by his train as the cloud floated towards him. He was glad of the water vapor when it enshrouded him and shielded him from the sun, and even gladder when the doors opened and there stood Aggy, dressed in jeans and her blue

zipped hoodie. She jumped off the ramp straight into his arms, and they hugged. Aggy pressed her cheek to his and purred,

“Oh I need this. The one true man on Earth, without a hint of malice, you give me hope my mission will not be in vain.”

The only other passengers descending from the Liner were her friends Tiggy and Zooey, and Jen and Russell.

They climbed on board, and he went to his office, and I pressed the bell . . . oops, sorry . . I've been writing about myself in the third person until now, but at this point I have to say I'd been knocked out by Aggy as she'd hugged me. The clever little girl who'd had all the stuffing knocked out of her, had returned, as I hoped, but buoyed up by a quiet confidence; a gritty determination. We held hands and ate cucumber sandwiches, but this time it wasn't just a one-way street. I felt something coming from her too. A power I'd never felt before. It was one of the greatest moments of my life (and I've met Jack Nicholson).

Aggy had spent the last two days riding her Honda around the city, enjoying the freedom of the road. She spent an hour or two just looking out at the ocean. The waves were powerful and wild like most things on Earth. She was glad to be back.

"You don't need to push me. I am going!" said Aggy through gritted teeth.

"We're not pushing you," said Zooey calmly, "we're encouraging you."

"This reminds me of escorting Tamsin back to her dressing room after she's done a scene with Tom!" laughed Tiggy.

Aggy, being 'encouraged' along by Tiggy and Zooey, reluctantly walked down the long corridor that led to the Conference Room, where she could Feel the malevolence of the Taller waiting for her.

Sona, Gordo, Magga, Forko and a few others sat on one side of a long table. In Nova's absence, they were standing in as the Hollywood branch of Earth Almighty's chiefs. Their opinions were split as far as negotiations were concerned. Some were quite hardline, but nowhere as radical as Nova.

Aggy put her hand in her hoodie pocket and found the egg. She toyed with it as she walked, surprisingly Feeling a little buzz from it. She swirled it between her fingers then grasped it tightly in her palm, and activated it. The Feels that emanated were abstract and she wasn't sure what she was experiencing, but then she realized what they were, and she opened the floodgates, allowing the full power of the Consensus to pour into her. Tiggy and Zooey could Feel the difference immediately and gave up pushing. Aggy turned to them and smiled.

"I love you," she said before striding into the Conference Room.

The Taller could Feel the power radiating from Aggy as she entered and sat down, her friends flanking her.

Sona spoke first,

"Did Nova come to your planet?"

Aggy nodded,

"She brought along mercenaries in battleships too. She said she was going to enslave us."

Magga chuckled, but Sona shook his head,

"I'm sorry. We didn't sanction that."

"Where is she?" asked Magga.

"I'm sorry to say that she's dead," Aggy said.

Magga's face dropped,

"How did it happen?"

"Betty killed her," Zooey said, "stabbed her multiple times with a box cutter."

"Why would she do that?" asked Magga.

"That's what Nova said too," said Tiggy, "which enraged Betty to continue stabbing her even more violently—"

"When was this? How long ago?" demanded Magga.

Aggy looked at Tiggy enquiringly,

"A week ago? Ten days? We've brought her body with us. It's in a meat locker in the kitchens."

Magga put her head in her hands, then ran from the room. There was silence for a moment before Sona said,

"Okay, tell us what you want please."

Aggy took a breath,

"None of our Kind will go anywhere near a war, let alone the frontline."

Sona nodded,

"Absolutely."

"You will allow us to unionize and negotiate fair wages."

The Taller consulted briefly then nodded.

"In every city, not just here in Hollywood."

The Taller consulted briefly, with much shaking of their heads. Sona said,

"Let's put that on hold for now. What else?"

"We want seats on the board of Earth Almighty in every country."

The Taller all shook their heads.

"Then we'll all just go home."

"Then we'll all just come and get you," said Forko, "do what Nova threatened."

"It didn't end well for Nova, or the mercenaries."

Forko stood up,

"Then we'll just blow your ridiculous planet to smithereens."

"So if you can't have us, you'd prefer no one to have us?"

"No, no, no, let's all calm down," said Sona, with his arms wide, "no one is getting blown to smithereens."

"Okay, I say again we want seats on the board of Earth Almighty in every country."

"Absolutely not," said Sona, "why would we agree to that?"

Aggy took a breath and expanded before their eyes,

"Why would you agree? Because otherwise we will tell your secret."

Sona shrugged,

"If you do that, it'll be your Kind that suffer, not us!"

"Not that secret. The big secret: We export our nuts to seven hundred other worlds in our part of the universe, all of which watch Shandling's Castle. And among those, there are plenty of nasty, greedy races similar to your own, who'd like nothing better than to know the location of this little

planet that's creating all the Art. You've masked it well so far, but of course our pilots know the exact coordinates.”

“For a bunch of IT nerds you've done very well, off exploiting the Humans and our Kind, but you're no warriors. Earth would be taken off you in a heartbeat.”

Sona and his compatriots sat up in their seats, raising their eyebrows, like they'd never considered this a possibility, which, in their hubris, they hadn't.

Aggy shrugged and smiled,

“Take it or leave it.”

Aggy, Tiggy and Zooey stood, then walked out.

“Wow!” said Gordo, “they’ve got us by the balls. I’m only now realizing how much we’ve taken the Conduits for granted. I'd always thought they were backwards for living in trees and using steam power, but they are deep and artistic in their own way, interpreting the Humans' Feels in subtle, nuanced layers.”

“Maybe it would be a good thing to be treating them as . . . a bit more equal?” suggested Sona.

“Junior Partners maybe,” spat Forko, “but Board members?”

“The Human Board members which run each department in London are all trustworthy, as long as they’re admirably rewarded for their silence—”

“Except for the Tech guys,” butted in Forko, “they’re always a worry, and having them shadowed by Conduits is the only way to know what’s going on in their minds—”

“Exactly my point,” re-interrupted Sona, “the Conduits are more honest and reliable.”

“Yes, the Humans are unreliable,” agreed Gordo, “whereas the Conduits aren't, because they have a lot to lose, if the secret got out.”

“Humans are unpredictable like that,” agreed Forko, “historically circulating from empathic to psychopathic every second generation or so.”

“Maybe the Conduits should be the ones running the departments, instead of them?” mused Gordo, “cut out the middleman?”

Sona was shocked by Forko’s pronouncement. Was a sea-change imminent? He had his escape-pod ready for the worst-case-scenario, but what about Heidi? Would a Liner get there in time to whisk her off the roof of the building?

“So we agree to their terms? Find a Conduit to join each Board.”

They all reluctantly nodded.

Sona picked up his scroll and went back to London.

The Girls went for coffee downstairs and waited for a text. It arrived, agreeing to the terms. Aggy sent an email to her Mum, who, as the Mother of the Voice, would pass the news on to the Consensus and get the Liners returning.

“So what do we do now?”

“Take a holiday, before we go back to work?”

“I don’t actually work at EA anymore,” said Aggy, “so I’m toying between going straight home to see Jiffy, or riding my bike to New York.”

Tiggy and Zoeey were proud of their friend. To even consider such an idea would have been unthinkable a year ago.

“Or we could get you a job on Shandling’s Castle?”

Sona found Heidi in an Edit Suite with a new client.

He stuck his head in and smiled expectantly but she shook her head imperceptibly.

"Sorry to interrupt, Heidi, but can you come to my office as soon as you finish please?"

She nodded. What could this be about? Her failure to find more like James? Her, neutralizing him by extracting his pain? That had bothered her, until she'd realized she was taking on some of his creativity. But she did feel guilty about that. It hadn't been intentional. She'd loved him so much then, and he loved her so much now.

Ooh, she should write that down.

"She'd loved him so much then,

he loved her so much now."

Was that a good line for her poem?

Strange, really. Had she only really loved him for that creative force radiating from him?

Now, she just liked him, but she liked the apartment and the lifestyle more, and liked herself less.

Heidi focussed on the girl sitting opposite her. Her Feels were disappointing, and her writing mechanical.

"Thanks for coming in," she said as she stood, "we'll let you know."

Sona wasn't in his office when Heidi looked in, but she heard him talking somewhere so decided to wait. If she was getting fired, she wanted to know immediately.

He eventually emerged from his rooms where the legendary Echo Chamber was, and greeted her,

"Heidi, I have good news for you."

She unclenched.

"Through an agreement reached with the Hollywood Conduits, we are promoting one of your Kind to the board, in each country we operate in, and I've chosen you."

He smiled at her, and she shook her head in surprise,

"I thought you were going to fire me!"

"You? My best Conduit? Never!"

"Is this another attempt to—"

"Heavens, no!" he assured her, "I'm over that . . . little . . . crush, I had on you . . . "

Heidi jumped up, excited,

"So what does this mean?"

Sona thought for a moment,

"Well, there's a substantial salary bump, no . . . " he paused to correct, "I mean to say there's a substantial salary, and you should join regular strategy meeting? It's with the other board members you met when we proposed your idea to them?"

Heidi remembered them and nodded.

"Otherwise, the day-to-day running has been down to me. We, the Taller, are spread thin across this globe, you know, there's only twenty-five of us in all."

Heidi cocked her head – he was telling the truth.

"I did not know that."

Picking up his tablet, he motioned for her to approach,

"So you will be relieving me of some of that burden, for which, I seemingly am quite grateful." He stopped and frowned, then smiled,

"Have you got your phone? Open the EA app, go to 'Advanced' and type this number, and you will become 'UK Board Member – in office - Vice President' of Earth Almighty, and thus, I suppose, my second in command."

Heidi did so; while thinking about a cool apartment she'd seen for sale in Parson's Green.

"Oh, and I'm texting you a list of the other new board members around the world. They need you to confirm your promotion."

Heidi looked at the text and noticed the name Aggy. Wasn't that the name of the girl who went home? She really must visit a Circle and catch up on the gossip.

"Now, if you'll excuse me," said Sona, "I need to spend an hour in my Echo Chamber." Heidi nodded and left, feeling very excited about her future.

Sona watched her go. He was shocked by everything that had happened recently, but mostly by the Conduits, who used to have been so naïve and easy to control.

Chapter Eight

The Conductor was excited to be back in the desert again, watching the mountainous cloud floating towards him. The strike was over, his friends were coming home, and he would get to welcome them all again. According to his new boss, Magga, the Liners would be carrying a full complement of passengers for every trip, so the Driver and he had added another set of carriages and a rear engine to the train. He opened the door and walked into stifling heat, but was quickly enveloped in the cold, moist cloud.

Heidi looked at her phone – hundreds of missed calls and texts from James. She was not happy. She feared her negativity would bring down the rest of her Kind in the Earth Almighty building. But she could actually Feel someone else who was worse off than her.

She went in search, first on her floor, then on the floor above. The anguish got louder, and Heidi followed it to Sona's suite, or more accurately, to Sona's PA., Sandy,

Heidi fought the urge to say, 'Are you okay?' like they always do, in the movies. She'd never seen a movie where the upset person has said, 'No I'm not fucking okay, you moron! Do I look okay, crying like a fucking baby?' No, she'd never seen a movie where this happened, but she hoped she would one day.

Instead, she said,

"Sandy? What happened?"

"Sona."

"Sona happened? What did he do?"

"I've been having a fling with him."

Heidi's heart sunk.

"He promised me a promotion to Business Affairs, and I fell for it."

Heidi sighed,

"Sandy! You're meant to hold out until you've got the promotion! Hasn't the Harvey Weinstein story taught you anything?"

Sandy said,

"No, it's not that. I trust him to promote me. It was what happened last night." Sandy looked around, checking that no one was close enough to feel her,

"We went out to supper, got a bit drunk and then came back here. Then he persuaded me to go in his Echo Chamber with him. It was very cozy, and we ended up naked. Then we were making love, and he turned the machine on."

She started crying again, actual sobs of misery. Heidi put her arm around her, her hand coming into contact with Sandy's bare shoulder, and immediately, Heidi felt a thousand souls' excruciating pain, their total desolation, their crushing fear of imminent death, their overwhelming desire for their mummy.

She pulled her hand away, like she'd touched a live wire.

"What was that?"

"It is the Echoes, Heidi," she sobbed.

Heidi stood and pulled Sandy up,

"Let's go to a Circle and get that out of you."

Gus was desperate. His kingdom was crumbling. He found Aggy's address then got a car over there. Her motorbike was parked outside the apartment block, so he assumed she was in. He was approaching the doors when she exited. She saw him, did a double-take, then a U-turn, but he caught the door and followed her in,

"Aggy! Please come back! The one-one-six isn't the same without you!"

She side-stepped him and ran outside,

No, I will not! Why do you think I walked out last time!"

He followed her, imploring,

"I get it - but everyone thinks they can just say no to me now - if you come back, they'll come back!"

She jogged towards the Mall,

"So you don't get it."

He ran after her, as fast as he could on those stumpy little legs,

"I'll make you rich! as rich as me!"

"And where has all those riches got you Gus? You have some cars and a nice home, and the rest you stash in an off-shore account, for what, exactly? But no one loves you, and you still go to sleep alone after eating two pizzas while having a wank over an old VHS tape of Miley Cyrus."

Gus stopped and said,

"How do you know that?"

Aggy turned and thrust out her hands in frustration, like she was saying 'Duh! You seem to have forgotten something. Think, idiot, think.'

Gus finally went,

"Oh!, of course! The Feely thing."

Aggy resumed walking towards the Mall, and Gus resumed following her.

Inside the Mall, Aggy Felt for Tiggy and Zooey, then followed that direction.

Gus persisted, sometimes trailing behind as his little legs weren't up to the task.

Aggy found them in the Conductor's partner's Wig Shop with Russell and Jen.

They hugged, then watched each other try on wigs. Russell tried on an afro, but nobody could see any difference.

Gus waddled in and continued his sales pitch,

"I'm just giving the people what they want!"

Aggy was exasperated,

"Just because people want something, it doesn't necessarily mean they should get it!"

Gus looked to Russell for back-up, but he held his hands up,

"I'm with Aggy on this. The porn you make is horrible and you should be ashamed of yourself."

Gus fell into a sofa and covered his eyes with his hands.

Even though it was faithfully relaying every message and voicemail that James sent her, Heidi didn't trust the phone. Not just her phone, any phone.

She'd always thought she was being bugged, even before her promotion and James had always said, "Don't flatter yourself."

But what she believed about the Echoes was too big to chance being overheard.

She found Sandy at her desk, apparently feeling much better having sat in a few Circles and off-loaded onto sympathetic, but horrified, people of her own Kind.

"Is Sona in?"

"No, he's gone to a concert at the Albert Hall, where they're recording the performers as EA's first experiment. You should be very proud."

"Ah, thank you Sandy, so can I borrow a scroll please?"

Sandy didn't bat an eyelid,

"Sure, where are you going?"

"I need to talk to Aggy in LA, but can't use the phone to tell her what you witnessed."

Sandy shrugged and brightened,

"Can I come?"

Heidi smiled and nodded. They found the scrolls and examined the dials.

"These are coordinates," Sandy said, "so we set them to where? Earth Almighty's Hollywood studios?"

"I don't think she works there anymore."

"Text her, ask her to suggest a place to meet, to speak privately."

Heidi nodded and sent the text. The reply arrived swiftly:

"The West Wig Shop, Valley Mall," with exact coordinates.

They adjusted the dials on their scrolls then sat on the sofa and closed their eyes.

When they opened their eyes, they were sitting in a dark, empty cinema. Nothing was playing.

"Do you think the Wig shop is directly above us, or below us?"

"I can't Feel anything. This cinema has really good insulation."

"I guess they'd have to if they're showing movies with the Added Feels?"

They were walking down the steps to the front when a dashing gentleman walked in through the out door by the screen.

"Can I help you?" he asked.

"We've just arrived from London," said Sandy, waving her scroll, "and we're looking for Aggy at a wig shop?"

He pointed up,

"I shall take you there," he said, leading the way to the exit.

One floor up, the spacious West Wig store was buzzing with new customers trying on the products. Aggy, Tiggy and Zooey were among them. Heidi and Sandy were tempted themselves, as they had a much more diverse selection than they could find in London. The Conductor pointed Aggy out and they went over and said Hi.

It was strange for their Kind to meet a stranger. Because no one was really a stranger to one another. There was always something that was familiar. They couldn't hug, but they could exchange over the air and then they were firm friends. They all chatted while they chose and bought wigs, then wore them out to parade amongst the other mall-rats. Heidi and Sandy felt released by their trip across the world, but they knew they'd have to get serious eventually.

They stopped for ice cream and while they ate, Heidi asked about Nova and the Battleships,

"So you actually froze them?"

"Yeah, it was amazing to see, and such a relief."

"That technique hasn't been used in two thousand years! I'm surprised anyone remembered how to do it."

"Me too, but it seemed instinctive at the time."

Aggy asked what they wanted to talk about.

Heidi looked around her, conspiratorially,

"Not here, let's go back to that cinema where we arrived."

Once inside, they sat clustered in two rows and Sandy told her story again.

"It was the most horrifying two minutes of my life!"

"It was! I Felt it fresh," agreed Heidi, "and we have an egg of it, if anyone . . . " but there were no takers.

"So what is an Echo?"

Heidi shook her head in disbelief at what she was about to say,

"I think it's the last dying breath of a Human, all their fear and pain, their regrets, their despair, their not wanting to die, all wrapped up in a purple bow for the sustenance of the Taller."

"And maybe the Humans' souls too," added Sandy, "if you believe in that, which I do."

Everyone was silent, as the full consequences of this statement sunk in.

"We were at a party at Nova's place," said Tiggy, "where we overheard her telling a general that he needed to increase the killing to ten-thousand-a-day, if he wanted to keep his job."

"What are you saying?" asked Aggy, "that the Taller need that many Echoes per day For what?"

"There's only twenty-five of them," said Heidi, "ten-thousand divided by twenty-five equals four hundred."

"So is it an addiction? a delicacy they think they need?" said Aggy.

"Sona said it enhanced his sexual prowess," said Sandy, "but I didn't notice."

They sank into silence for a while before Zooey said,

"They really are cunts, aren't they?"

"Cunts?" asked Sandy.

"Cunts are people who don't know right from wrong, not because they weren't educated in morals, but because they were educated by sociopaths.

Cunts don't give a shit if they have to stand on the neck of another to get ahead.

And if you point out they're doing wrong, Cunts can't see it.

And if they can see it, Cunts don't care."

Sandy nodded,

"They're cunts alright."

They sat in silence again before Tiggy asked,

"So what do we do?"

"We kill them!" hissed Sandy all riled up by hearing the word Cunt so many times, "we have our Kind at every branch. In London, I'm alone with Sona every day, both of us are. We could easily do it then."

"Could you though?" asked Aggy, "I watched Betty stab Nova fifty times, but she had a lifetime of rage bubbling up inside her. Justified rage. But I don't think I could stick a knife in Magga, just because she's taken over from Nova."

Heidi squinted,

"Yeah, you're probably right," she looked disappointed,

"I can do it," said a voice in the dark.

Gus poked his head up from his hiding place a few rows forward.

"You're right – I should be ashamed of myself, and I want to make amends."

"By killing all the Taller? That's crazy," said Russell.

Gus stood up and stretched,

"No! I've never felt saner! You'll see!" He ran from the cinema singing "I want to be free!" by Queen.

They watched him go, then looked at one another then Heidi finally said,

"Well, anyway . . . "

Aggy said,

"The wars are bullshit, aren't they? Everyone freely admits it now, except the Taller, the politicians and the arms manufacturers."

Everyone nodded.

"So it may just be created by the Taller to kill Humans to get the Echoes—"

"So if we stop the war—"

"There won't be any Humans dying—"

"Or enough Echoes for the Taller!"

They all looked very impressed by themselves.

"Well, the Humans did give us the Beatles, so it's the least we could do for them."

An hour later they were still there, except for having popped out for popcorn, which seemed appropriate.

"There's no point in doing it here. There's no seat of power in LA."

"and Washington has very few of our Kind. We're only used as lie detectors, apparently."

"So it's London. Thousands of our Kind right on top of the seat of power."

"Do you think that's enough?"

"We could get the Liners to ferry all of you over to London, from every office. We could have a million in Hyde Park on the day."

"Now that sounds like enough."

If this was a movie, we'd have a musical montage now, with lots of quick cuts of them being proactive, productive, producer-ish and many other words beginning with 'P'. Heidi and Sandy in London on the phone, scrolling on their tablets. Also there'd be Aggy going to see the Conductor and them going out to the desert, eating cucumber sandwiches, then speaking to the pilot of the Liner and there'd be a lot of nodding. Plus Tiggy and Zooey in the Edit Suite with Russell and Jen. Russell would stroke his beard while listening then nod. And finally the girls at their Circles, spreading the word about their plan.

Gus waited for his guest in the palatial penthouse suite atop the Babylon hotel. He had enjoyed his last tryst with this gorgeous woman and hoped this would be a longer, more languorous, whole night of passion in as many different positions as possible.

He heard the sub-woofer thud of the helicopter growing as it approached the pad outside his windows, then saw the spotlights converging as the pilot lowered the machine towards the big 'H'.

Gus saw the door slide open, and Magga jump from the hovering chopper like a superhero, her long blonde hair swirling around her beautiful face. Her appropriately named Jumpsuit was unzipped to her belly and her breasts danced as she strode towards him. He opened the door, and she slid in, kissing him passionately, and Feeling him through and through.

"Mmmm, you're disgusting, but I like it."

Gus smiled and nodded in appreciation.

"Why thank you ma'am," he said as he craned his neck to peer up at her towering over him. The good thing about her height was that his mouth was exactly in line with her erect nipples, poking through her jumpsuit. He clamped his lips on one and she moaned, cradling his head to her like he was a suckling baby. And for a few moments he was.

"Have you ever read the 'Horny Goof' by Moebius?" Magga asked, as she lay in bed, weak and weary, a few hours later.

"No, but it sounds interesting." Gus was carving slices of pork butt and feeding them to himself, all the time with a fat cigar hanging from his lips.

"It's a comic-book by the greatest master of the genre - you'd like it. You remind me of him."

"This 'greatest master of the genre?'"

"No, idiot. The Horny Goof!"

"Send me a link?"

"You won't ever read it."

"No I will, I promise! There's a bookshop on—"

"No, I mean you won't ever read it, because I know what you've got planned—"

"Me? Nothing, I, I'm an empty vessel. . . "

She put her hands around his neck.

"I'm disgusting! Just sexual stardust, me—"

He tried to fight but her long fingers were too much for him. He felt his eyes bulging, his ears deafening, his throat closing as he realized he was close to death, but all he could think was of those sessions with Madame Putin, and her array of belts and plastic bags. Now, if only he could remember his Safe Word?

Magga bent over him, smiling into his dying eyes.

If you were a native of the planet of the Bjorks, you would have been able to spot a tiny wisp of purple gas leaving his every orifice, that Magga slowly sucked into her lungs.

Russell and Jen got up in the middle of the night and made their way to the Mall, where the Conductor had unlocked the gates. Along with Aggy, Tiggy and Zooey and a thousand other Conduits, they boarded the train for the desert. Many slept in their seats while the Conductor watched over them. The Liner was waiting for them when they arrived in the desert, ready to flit over to London.

Russell asked the Conductor if he was joining them, and he said yes, but he'd be coming on the last shuttle in a few hours. He bade them a good flight then rushed back to pick up the next scheduled batch.

London is a big city and on a busy, touristy day, when there's a concert in Hyde Park for one-hundred-thousand, new exhibitions opening, the changing of the guard, it still manages to absorb everyone and remain partially civilized. But on that day, trying to organize over a million people to not all try and get on the same subway at the same time, took some organization.

Their flight came in over the Thames estuary, a very wide body of water that slowly gets thinner and thinner until it hits East London. The five of them sat on the long bench seat in the pilot's cabin, watching Mazzy guide the mountainous craft gently onto the estuary. To any outside observer, it looked the same as in the desert – a cloud, slowly floating upstream until it engulfed a long jetty. Except, the identical cloud behind it might have been a giveaway, and the one behind that.

They went down and joined the queue. On the jetty they were handed travel instructions by one of their Kind, talking with a dismal cockney accent. Coaches were waiting which would take them to various Tube stations and bus stops, dropping off a few at a time so that they could blend in with the other commuters.

When Russell and Jen were ejected outside a grotty-looking Tube station, he balked at it and hailed a taxi. In general, he felt like a man of the people, just not those particular people. Aggy, Tiggy and Zooey were the last off the coach (Heidi had wanted to keep them safe for as much of the journey as possible). They got on the Tube and headed into town. They saw many of

their own Kind heading in the same direction and many of them wanted to meet Aggy, ‘the Girl who went home’, and take a selfie with her. Aggy didn’t mind, but she also didn’t understand.

She asked the girls to be more subtle in their treatment of her. They were trying to keep a low profile, but their enthusiasm was infectious. As they all got off the train at Embankment, someone started singing a clip from a Beatles song: “Boy, you gonna carry that weight, carry that weight a long time” and everyone joined in, including Aggy, Tiggy and Zooey. It seemed appropriate. It is a very short excerpt from Abbey Road, but her Kind liked repetitious anthems and could continue in this vein for ages.

But as they crossed Trafalgar Square they met another large group singing Journey’s “Don’t stop believing, hold on to that feeling, Don’t stop believing, hold on to that feeling,” over and over. There was confusion as the two groups merged, until weirdly, Simple Mind’s “Promised you a miracle” emerged from the mêlée, which Aggy had always thought was a very repetitive song, so she guessed that was why it was a favorite of her Kind.

Sona was in the middle of a conference call with the Taller, trying to decide what to do, now Nova was officially dead. His instinct was to make his case for taking the lead, but he didn’t want to appear too pushy. He felt his compatriots were all doing the same. It was an extraordinary time, with Liners of Conduits flooding into London, just as the Taller needed, for all the extra positions available.

He saw Heidi walk past his office and called to her, but she kept on walking. He put the Taller on hold and followed her into the stairwell. She was going down, along with many other of her Kind.

"Heidi, where are you all going?"

"I have to take a 'Personal Day', back later maybe."

Another girl passed him and said,

"Me too." and another and another.

Heidi strode on to the South Bank of the Thames, followed by all the girls from the building.

They marched over the bridge and past Parliament towards St James's Park. Other large groups of young, golden-freckled girls got off the tube at Notting Hill Gate, others filled buses on Kensington High Street, and others walked past the Albert Hall, all singing the chorus to Hey Jude.

Aggy enjoyed the walk through this new city, the old buildings resonating with the history of protest movements over the centuries. She also felt less self-conscious, now that she had melted into the crowd and was no longer a focal point.

You would've thought that bunches of immigrants singing in the street like sports fans would attract negative attention from the tourists and locals but seemingly not. Some even sang along! Maybe her Kind were exuding a positivity that everyone found exhilarating?

Had Heidi made arrangements with the police? They were very kindly stopping traffic at Park Lane so Aggy, Tiggy and Zooey and her Kind could cross. The singing stopped as they entered the park, as everyone was amazed at the size of the Circle, spreading in every direction, sitting in silence. How many people were here?

"Almost a million," said Sandy, who'd been waiting for their arrival, "but there's more to come, so by the time we start, we'll have hit seven figures," they hugged and Exchanged, then Sandy said, "we think you guys should be in the center."

"Sure," said Tiggy, "but where is it?"

"Somewhere near that Oak tree?" Sandy said, pointing into the distance.

"Okay," said Aggy, as she led them into the Circle, stepping carefully between her Kind. Everyone in the Circle slowly became aware of them and turned to find them, sending them warm, confidence boosting Feels. They also shifted and revealed a path for them to easily walk to the Oak tree.

The three took their shoes off and sat with their backs to each other, their bare heads touching. Their feet entwined with others in the front row, and they connected to the Circle. So many souls Feeling as one, it was almost like being in a Tree at home, but in some ways better, as they were actually touching. Aggy could Feel the power of the Circle rushing through her, and a deep peace came over her as she fell into the Meditation.

"The Third Reading of the Appropriation Bill is happening now," said a voice in the mist, which Aggy could just recognize as Heidi's. Everyone in the Circle followed Aggy's example and went deep.

Russell, Jen, and the Conductor watched from Park Lane. The Conductor's partner had joined the Circle, sitting just the other side of the railings. She reached out and held her partner's hand, and he could feel the powerful vibrations of the Circle in action. He reached out to Russell and Jen so they could feel it too.

Russell was overwhelmed. This was like the MDMA he took at that college party, and the love he felt for everyone around him, and the beautiful optimism he felt about his future which was unstoppable if he believed enough, and all the ideas flowing through his mind for stories that he knew could change the world, and . . . and . . .

It was ironic that they employed the Conduits to export Human Feels around the universe, when they could create such a positive, loving, unstoppable force all of their own.

He had never felt hope like this, never loved everyone more, than in that moment, especially Jen, who he hugged and kissed as tears poured down his cheeks.

Nothing moved in London. The Circle was silent but everything emanating from there was also silent and still. Like they could feel something in the air but couldn't quite work out what it was. Office workers turned off their radios and peered out their windows, Drivers killed their engines and got out to look at the sky, chatty tourists walked out of Tube stations and immediately fell silent. Even the pigeons sat quietly cooing.

"It is done," announced Heidi through the mist, "thank you, that was awesome." She'd been standing at the back, monitoring the news channels with Sandy. They sent Aggy a wave and a 'see you later', and headed back to work.

Slowly, the Circle uncoupled, and people returned the way they'd come, singing their anthems, as London came back to life.

Aggy watched them disperse, a million new friends that she hoped to bump into again sometime. Tiggy and Zooey were still feeling the rush and hugged the tree. Through the crowd

Aggy saw her friends approaching. They all looked very emotional, especially Russell, who's beard was damp.

"Let's go for Tea at the Wolseley, they do the best cucumber sandwiches," said the Conductor, "even better than my own!" For he was not only the kindest man in the universe, but also the most humble.

Chapter Nine

Sona was watching the news out of the corner of his eye while he spoke with Gordo on Zoom.

"Breaking News! The War is over. During the third reading of the Appropriation Bill in parliament to agree updates to the Budget, an addendum was added to ban all military action against the Reds and the Yellows. It was carried unanimously, will save the taxpayers billions and everyone seems very happy about it. Our allies are expected to consider their position in a new light, after this revelation.

"In related news, the share price of B.A.D, Britain's biggest weapons manufacturer, has plummeted. The CEO is standing on a ledge 78 floors above the City and we can go there live to see if he jumps . . ."

Sona saw the Conduits returning over Westminster Bridge from his window. He ran to the elevator and descended to the ground floor, breathing raggedly. He ran to find Heidi among the crowd and finally saw her with Sandy coming down the steps from the bridge. Heidi saw Sona and imagined he looked a little shorter than before. Of course, she was still a few steps higher than him. Sandy and she stopped and let others file past as Sona looked up at them.

"Was that you?"

"Not *just* me."

"Oh Heidi, you don't know what you've done."

"Don't I?"

"You've ruined everything."

"For you, maybe.

"It's all going to fall apart now!"

"Not for us. Not for Earth."

"But we run the show. It cannot function without us. I'm the only one who knows how to run the Discombobulator!"

"I know everything you know Sona," Sandy said through gritted teeth, "I know everything you've fucking thought for the past year." Sona flinched and took a step back.

"What the fuck do think we do here?" she asked, rhetorically, "only focus on who you tell us? You're so fucking arrogant, bringing us in to suck the Feels out of anyone, without thinking we might fucking dare to do it to you too."

Heidi was impressed. Sandy had burst out of her shell, saying exactly what Heidi would have said to him herself, but without so many fucks. She added,

"You don't actually contribute anything to this setup, do you – except take all the money. You're nothing more than a parasite."

She focussed on him and saw the desperate little squirmy thing he really was inside his shell.

"Go away."

He seemed to shrink before her as he did as he was told.

A parasite? That's what she'd called him. Outrageous! He was a pioneer who'd brought prosperity to this third-world, backwater planet - or to some of the inhabitants at least. Yes, he had been a pioneer, not a parasite. A profiteer, at worst.

Defeated, Sona skulked back to his office and looked out over all he had ruled. London, the stinking, fetid capital of the English branch of the Human Race. The brain-dead morons had no idea how much money they had been generating for Earth Almighty. Seventy-thirty? Seventy-thirty-*thousand* would be more accurate.

Human parasites stashed their wealth in off-shore accounts and buildings that would never again be lived in. The Taller had done the same, except elsewhere in the universe.

But it was over.

He sighed and his shoulders slumped, as he resigned himself to his fate. Going into his Echo Chamber, he retrieved a white box which he put on his desk. It looked rather like a DAB radio, with some buttons and a dial, which he fiddled with. There was a small door in the top which he opened. Inside was a cavity that looked like a tiny version of his Echo Chamber. He took a scalpel from a drawer and cut his finger which he then placed above the door, pouring his blood into the chamber.

If someone had been watching Sona, they'd have seen him getting sleepy, his head slowly dropping onto his forearms, pulling his hand gradually from the box, the blood streaking across the white surface. If that same someone had been watching Sona through a microscope, they'd have seen that blood move strangely, with a dark, curling set of spidery, octopussy tendrils slither into the box, as the door slammed shut.

A moment later, a humming could be heard, and the box rose from the desk and flew out the window.

Chapter Ten

Joy was unconfined for the families of the surviving military personnel, who were coming home. Once the British government had withdrawn their forces from the frontline, other governments of the Blues decided to do the same. Some happened magically like in London, others just lost the will to fight anymore, once the Taller disappeared.

Aggy, Tiggy and Zooey were staying in the same Venice Beach hotel that Russell had previously got for them, while they searched for new apartments more fitting to their new wage bracket. Heidi had come to join them for a break, before they all started their new, elevated duties at Earth Almighty. They had brought their scrolls to the hotel so they could go straight from sipping cocktails on Aggy's balcony to the inaugural conference of the new Board members at the Beijing Head office.

Heidi was quite excited by the prospect.

Aggy not so much, who always found committee meetings (Circles) boring.

She'd been instructed to attend by the Consensus so decided that, if she had to suffer, Tiggy and Zooey should too.

Sandy, in London, had agreed to come to Beijing as she was very knowledgeable about the running of the business, and wanted to advise the other branches that had been left with no rudder to steer them.

The Girls lay on their loungers cradling their Scrolls, then shut their eyes.

They arrived in Beijing, each in the privacy of their own closet, as was the Scrolls' protocol. They found each other, stashed their Scrolls in one closet, then went to introduce themselves. There were many Humans there, Heads of various departments, but when they Felt them, their motives didn't seem very different from the Tallers'. They were definitely angling to take over the various branches of Earth Almighty.

Sandy, making her background report on her branch, said,

"I am still chasing the money, but even if we don't recover any of it, I've now rerouted most payments away from the Taller, to new accounts for the London branch. The income is staggering, and I can show you all how to do this for your branches tomorrow."

Aggy was shocked. Tomorrow? She was not coming back tomorrow. She wasn't even sure she was going to last the day!

Sandy was still talking,

"We will not only have enough to pay all our employees handsomely, but we'll have a surplus large enough to give everyone on Earth a comfortable basic income, free healthcare, and—"

"But don't you think people will suspect something?" asked a man from Sydney, "if we're suddenly putting free money in their account?"

"They'll think something is up!"

"Well something is up!" retorted Sandy, stamping her authority on the room, "all the CEOs of the branches of Earth Almighty have disappeared and the Endless War has ended. It must be obvious to anyone that the two things are connected, surely?"

There was a murmur from the Humans, who tried to come up with objections, and a positive wave from her Kind.

The next topic was what had happened to the Taller? The Girls looked at one another and cringed. How could they tell that story without sounding like conspiracy theorists? Their own Kind would understand the Echoes but the Humans? Maybe they should approach their Kind individually and ask whether they were aware of what the Echoes were?

At lunch, Heidi sat alone on the edge of a fountain, scribbling some new lines she'd just thought up. She hoped her poetry was improving, but she knew she'd never reach James's heights, who'd annoyingly sent her another brilliant poem earlier. He was definitely back on form. It was a shame he wasn't very good when he was happy, but at least she knew for certain that she hadn't snatched his talent away from him.

Aggy, Tiggy and Zooey joined her by the fountain. Tiggy and Zooey sat backwards with their feet in the water, Exchanging their minds, and their saliva. Aggy loved that they loved each other so much but she did sometimes wonder how long their honeymoon period could last.

"You're Aggy right?" Aggy looked up. A young soldier stood before her.

"Yes I am," she said.

He pointed at the four of them,

"I heard a rumor that you lot are responsible for the end of the war?"

Aggy looked at her friends,

"Why would anyone suggest such a thing?" she joked, feigning humility, "but anyway, how can I help you?"

"I'm part of the Security Detail for your conference and I have some information for you which I think is important?"

Aggy nodded,

"What is it?"

He leant in and whispered,

"You know about the Echoes, right?"

Aggy nodded and motioned for him to sit beside her. The others moved closer, conspiratorially.

"And the Harvesters? They are . . ." But they didn't need to hear his description, they just cocked their heads and saw this boy's horrified memory of his near-death experience. An enormous machine, crawling, hovering, hopping and bulldozing its way across the battlefield, making a noise like a meat grinder, chopping and hoovering soldiers from both sides into its gigantic, insatiable, giant-shark-like mouth. General Zoka stood at its prow, laughing insanely. The Girls all reeled in shock at the horror. These kids weren't dying for the defense of their country, or for an ideal. They were lambs being led to slaughter.

"That was my one experience of a Harvester. I ran from there, deserting that day."

Aggy looked into his frightened eyes. He was probably five years younger than her.

"Did you see a purple light, or an aura coming into the Harvester?" asked Tiggy.

He shook his head. Tiggy turned to her friends and sent them a thought,

"That's what Zoka and Nova were talking about at the party. He suggested sending us to the frontline and (I now realize) she said no, because we can see the Echoes! So she never intended to send us to war."

"Then it's lucky we couldn't hear her clearly, otherwise there'd have been no walkout."

"What are you doing?" asked the boy, who was feeling the silence getting awkward.

"Sorry," said Heidi, "just a little jetlagged."

"I've heard other stories since about Zoka, that I didn't believe until that day.

That he would just hover next to a building that they were about to strike then vacuum all the Echoes as the Humans died under the rubble."

He was crying. Unashamedly letting the water flow down his cheeks. Aggy felt tears come to her eyes.

"Do you know what the Echoes actually are?" he whispered, "are they the souls of the dead?"

"Maybe," she said, "some people believe that, but I think the Harvester is catching all the negative energy first - the pain, the fear, the despair, the horror . . . "

"Is Zoka a vampire?"

Aggy was surprised and didn't know what to say. They'd all had lived for so long in the world where you never told the truth to a Human, that now the world had changed, she was stumped for an answer.

"Or worse?" the boy suggested, "I've heard that if he is hungry he just bulldozes a town with the Harvester, savoring the youthful Echoes from the schoolyards."

The Girls looked horrified.

"and now, apparently, he's just randomly plowing through towns and cities in the Harvester, hoovering up our people like there's still a war on."

During this conversation, the Girls were unaware that a figure hidden in shadows was searching all the closets of the Beijing Head office for their scrolls. The sneak eventually found the correct closet and shut the door behind him. He took the first scroll and started twisting the dials, programming in new coordinates. When he had done all four, he took up his own scroll and disappeared.

Heidi, Aggy, Tiggy and Zooey had had an exhausting day at the Conference, but the soldier's news had freaked them out. Zoka was alive. He had not left the planet.

None of them were sure what to think,

"I guess it was too easy, wasn't it?" said Tiggy, "just stopping the war so they'd all fly away."

Heidi opened the closet door and handed out the scrolls,

"Shall we continue this on the beach?" she said, smiling, "or will it be night-time now?"
She closed her eyes and activated the device.

Chapter Eleven

She opened her eyes and found herself in a dark, echoey room. As her eyes acclimatized she thought it may be a factory? She was sitting in an enormous, empty water tank, or vat? It was massive and round with blades coming off an axel in the middle, like she was a microbe in a Magimix blender, but it was twenty yards wide, made of cold, grey, rusting metal. Above her were girders, supporting pullies with cables and hooks. Car sized buckets hung from some of the hooks.

She shook her scroll then activated it again, but nothing happened.

Tiggy appeared close by, then Zooey and then . . .

Aggy shouted, "Help!"

They looked around in the gloom but could not find her.

"Aggy! Where are you?"

Aggy felt around her. She was surrounded by cold metal. She was in a round, cold, metal hole.

"I'm in a round, cold, metal hole!"

"Then you're directly above us!" cried Zooey, "in a big bucket! we can't come save you because we're trapped in a much larger bucket, sorry."

When Aggy jumped, she could just touch the top lip of the bucket. She tried three times before she hooked her fingers over the lip. Then another three attempts to pull herself up. She looked over the edge, and saw the girls thirty feet below. Above her was the handle hanging on a massive hook. She started to climb the handle, pulling herself up inch by inch, until she got to

the hook. Then she could stand on the handle and reach above the hook to the girder supporting the whole set-up.

The Girls looked on, wincing if she slipped, whooping when she made progress. She made it on to the girder, lying in the grease and dust, then started to pull herself along.

A noise made everyone jump, then freeze. A brutal, chugging engine was getting deafeningly nearer. Its lights illuminated the factory for a moment, and the Girls could see it was derelict. The machine hove into view, hissing and wailing and they recognized it as the one from the boy soldier's memory. Except they could see the purple aura leaking from its mouth and from tubes going to tanks at its rear. The engines stopped. Someone jumped down into shadows. Footsteps could be heard clunking closer, echoing around the heavy metal surfaces.

Aggy saw him first, coming out of the shadows. A giant, with arms as wide as his legs, dressed in urban-camo army fatigues. A bandoleer of shells and grenades was slung across his chest. It was Zoka. She gripped her girder even tighter.

Then he came into view of the girls.

"Only three of you?"

The girls said nothing, just stared at him.

"Where's the other one? Your speaker at the negotiations? The Voice?"

Zoocy shrugged,

"She got delayed talking about admin or something," she was clearly distressed but had no intention of letting this monster know, "why are we here?"

"Because I want you here!" he shouted, causing them all to jump, "because you fucked it for us and I want payback!"

"Are you going to kill us?" asked Tiggy, unable to hide her fear.

Zoka considered this for ten seconds, then rocked his head from side to side,

"Eventually."

He took a grenade from his bandoleer, unpinned it, and threw it down at them. They scattered, running to the other side of the giant, central axel, where they threw themselves on the ground. Zoka ducked and it exploded.

They were shocked but unhurt, except for their ears. It was like they were inside a bell, and it was still ringing.

Aggy, on the girder, watched in horror as he tortured her friends. They'd figured they should stay the other side of the axel from him, as he stalked around the vat.

She tried not to make a sound as she inched herself forward, but the dust had got up her nose and she felt a sneeze coming on. Zoka threw another grenade below, bouncing off the far wall and hitting Tiggy on the leg. The Girls all ran around the axel and dropped. Aggy sneezed violently, but at the same moment the grenade exploded.

The girls had minor shrapnel wounds this time. Tiggy, a slice into her side. Zooey, her right arm. Heidi, her temple.

Zoka looked disappointed.

"Where is the Voice? She's missing all the fun."

He lifted two grenades from his bandoleer this time, feinting the various directions he might throw them.

Aggy watched the torture as she forced herself forward again. She could save them, if she hurried!

"So what do you want?" asked Heidi, as bravely as she could.

Zoka didn't understand the question.

"What do you want!" asked Heidi, again.

Zoka shrugged as he feinted another throw and they bobbed on their toes,

"I want this!"

Tiggy burst into tears, as did Aggy, Feeling the trauma. She sniveled as she hurriedly pulled herself forwards. In the gloom, through her tears, she could make out smiling faces beckoning her forward. Beautiful faces momentarily caught in a beam of light from a hole in the roof. Surely not. Her panic was making her hallucinate.

Zoka threw the two grenades, and the girls ran from them as they bounced around, before exploding. Aggy stopped and watched in horror as the dust cleared. Finally, she spotted them, all alive. Damaged, but alive. She inched forward again, so close to a platform that might lead her downstairs.

The Girls picked themselves up, in case of another onslaught. They were black and blue and bleeding but alert to the danger.

How many more grenades did this psycho have? Plenty unfortunately. This time he plucked three from his belt and juggled them. Tiggy fell to her knees, but Zooey wouldn't let her submit. She dragged her back to her feet while watching Zoka out of the corner of her eye.

Aggy made it to the end of the beam and dropped on to the platform. She peered into the gloom, trying to decide which direction to go in and it was then she saw the faces. The beautiful faces in the shadows. Surrounding her. Coming closer. Hands reaching out.. Closing in on her. Feeling for her with their outstretched palms. The Taller Feeling her out. She tried to block them, but there were too many. Each hand was Feeling inside her. Searching her brain, not for memories, but for her Motor Cortex. As each of them found it and squeezed it, Aggy found it harder to move.

"I wish Nova was here to witness the death of the Voice," said Magga wistfully, "like you witnessed hers, didn't you?"

Aggy was unable to move her legs, but defiantly nodded and said,

"I did, and she died like a pussy, screaming 'Why Betty! Why!' like a pussy!"

Magga upped the squeeze, and the strength started leaving Aggy's arms.

"The Voice isn't meant to be like this!" complained Gordon, "the Voice is respectful, dignified, staid, . . . "

Aggy was defeated. Her body was failing. She was pushed backwards and forwards by the hands. She made fists and dug her nails into her own hands, drawing blood and pain, that helped shield her from the squeezes on her brain. Aggy managed to get her hand into her pocket. It fell on the egg and she grabbed it. She was immediately filled with the power of the Consensus, which exploded out of her as a bolt of lightning. Everyone who was Feeling her was electrified,

as was the platform, and the surrounding structure, until the metal melted and buckled and everyone slid off the platform and fell towards the vat. Zoka looked up in disbelief as his compatriots descended screaming upon him, entangling him as they all crashed into the vat, crushed beneath the twisted, red-hot metal.

The Girls looked at the pile of rubble as the dust cleared. Among the twisted metal and bricks, bodies moved. They called for Aggy, but no answer came. Slowly, people crawled out of the wreckage. Magga, Gordo, Forko and others, bent and battered. The Girls cleared bricks and twisted steel to tunnel into the rubble, and they did find more Taller and helped them out, but . . . not . . . Aggy . . .

No, wait. Isn't that her blue hoodie?

Could it have been torn off her in the fall?

Or . . .

Dig deeper . . .

Nothing . . .

No more bodies . . .

There was no other conclusion.

She had been crushed in the fall.

She was dead.

The Girls wept like humans, while Magga looked on and chuckled.

The Taller sat around licking their wounds until Forko emerged from under a girder.

"Now look what you crazy bitches have done!"

"Yes," said Zooey, "you prey on worlds, and throw grenades at us for entertainment, but *we're* the crazy bitches!"

The Taller all stood and surrounded the Girls, slowly closing in on them. Forko sneered and licked his lips as he advanced.

Magga spat hate from every pore.

"You fuckers need to die," shouted Zooey, lunging forward. She grabbed Zoka's bandoleer and pulled a few pins from grenades. The handles sprang off and the countdown began, everybody shrieking and running as Zoka tried to throw the bandoleer away, but they were all in a big metal hole and were vaporized by twenty grenades all exploding at once. Flesh and bone and brain splattered against the walls, and even tiny squirly, spidery things were not able to survive. Everyone was Puttanesca'd.

Dead.

Chapter Twelve

Aggy opened her eyes and shrieked at the cloudless, blue sky above her. She wasn't burning. Falling and burning. She on her lounge in Venice Beach, clutching her scroll, in her jeans and hoodie.

The water looked inviting down below, but she reckoned she should wait for the others to return. Their inert bodies lay next to her, cradling their scrolls. She ordered cocktails for them all and looked out at the Pacific.

It was ironic that the egg, an invention of the Taller, was the thing that had brought them down. The egg, being able to encapsulate the total Goodness of a race, and that Goodness being so destructive to those that were not Kind.

She felt for it in her pocket, but when she touched it, she Felt nothing. It was running, but empty of anything. Had the egg exhausted all its power during the struggle? Or had it already faded before she thought she was using it? This was—

The others all awoke, screaming in terror, then realized where they were. They looked around and saw Aggy amongst them and whooped with joy, just as the cocktails arrived.

A few months later:

Russell drove his wife Jen to the IKEA store in the Valley. Tiggy and Zooey, his new executive producers of Shandling's Castle sat in the back with the kids. They entered the store and while Jen and Russell looked for furniture, Tiggy and Zooey focussed on couples until they found the type they were looking for. Following them through the displays at a discreet distance was easy with the one-way system. They really liked this elder couple, who were choosing furniture and were oblivious to everyone. Tiggy and Zooey absorbed their slow-burning love for each other, and found it comforting, in the same way as the Consensus, except a lot more exciting.

Zooey said,

"I think we've found our couple for Beatrice's parents overdubs," pointing them out to Russell who was ecstatic and went to proposition them.

Aggy stood with the Conductor in front of their restaurant near the main entrance of the Mall. They held an enormous pair of scissors and together they cut a big ribbon which glided to the floor. She cried,

"I declare the first Fish-Bulb restaurant open for business!"

The crowd of her own Kind applauded. They all flooded in and took their seats at the ring-shaped tables. In the hole at the center of each table stood a Human Chef laying out the plates with various finger food, including a Cheese Puff, a Stuffed Mushroom, a Barbequed Prawn, an

Anchovy on Toast, plus a few more. He was wearing shorts. The customers excitedly removed their shoes and socks, then touched their feet to the chef's legs.

"Ready?" he said, "Let's start with the Crabcake, shall we?" He popped the morsel into his mouth and they all followed suit, their faces lighting up with the pleasure of the tastes flooding their palettes.

Aggy, Jiffy, the Conductor and his partner looked on proudly.

Russell and Jen were also acting as chefs, and had Tiggy and Zooey and some other Conduits from Shandling's Castle at their tables, plus Sandy (new Global President of Earth Almighty).

"So what's next?" the Conductor asked, "I mean once we've got ten of these in every city on Earth?"

Aggy smiled,

"Something with scents?"

She felt someone prod her in the back,

"I'm thinking Live Lesbian Sex Shows," said her Mum, emerging from the kitchen, "where we can touch our feet to the Humans and get all the Feels while they're doing it!"

"Mum!"

Glossary

The Taller. They are the people who run Earth Almighty (and also act as ‘consultants’ in Governments and Defense), who bought (relative) prosperity back to the world by breaking the monopolies of the Tech Billionaires, and creating their own.

Conduits (also known to themselves as ‘our Kind’). The people who have a special talent for being able to record actors’ feelings, then transmit those feelings to others for the enhancement of the show they are watching.

Feel, as opposed to feel. Conduits can Feel what’s going on inside the actors, all their emotions, physical pain, fear, resentment. They can also Record it, and Play it back later.

Exchange. Conduits like to hug one another. When touching, they can immediately ‘know’ another of their Kind, and vice versa.

Circles. Conduits meet and sit in Circles. The benefits of this are similar to people in Recovery who go to Twelve Step Meetings – Meeting with like-minded people who you can share your joy with, or dump your problems on. Also, you can catch up on all the gossip and go for coffee afterwards.

Scrolls can transport you across the world instantly. Very handy for that emergency meeting in New York, or catching your wife cheating on you in Lanzarote.

Appendix.

Hi! Your kindly Conductor here. Your ~~un~~reliable narrator.

I hope you enjoyed my story. Some people have said it needs more detail, but I'm not sure. My favorite author as a teenager was Richard Brautigan, famous for his very spare prose in books like the Hawkline Monster, and I modeled my style on his.

As well as modeling my moustache on his. Long and floopy and falling onto his bottom lip. But that was impractical so mine has now evolved into more of a Sam Elliott 'tache, shortening and widening out a bit. Which is cool, because I also have that baritone Southern drawl of his.

I'm basically a short, cut-price, second-rate Sam Elliott, without the beautiful wife, or the money, or fame, or anything. Except a rusting campervan and a mind full of ideas that won't let me sleep!

When I was concocting this story, I had the big plan in my head from start to finish, but I'd sit down to write then let a scene unfold on the paper in a stream of consciousness, whereby, unbeknownst to me, the characters would take the lead, bigging up their own dialogue, taking me into strange places, and generally screwing with my head! Sometimes, I loved what they'd done, and I went with it, having to rearrange scenes and add sub-plots, etc.

Other times, they took the wrong path, and I then had to backpedal. More often, I wrote something that was too long, but didn't want to junk it entirely, so I've included it in this appendix, along with some other bits and bobs that were too expositional and ruined the flow of

their scene. I'm hoping you may find this of interest. If not, just put the book down now, and back away . . .

This is the other scene on page 170, where Russell tells everyone a story, but I cut away from him. Here is that excerpt:

“Hi Russell, you are live, no swearing please,” she sniggered, “just kidding – you can swear all you fucking want.”

Russell laughed then replied,

“Hi Dora, hi everyone, thanks for having me. I have one last short story in mind which I think you may like, which is a bit darker than what you expect from the soapy Shandling’s Castle, so be warned. I’ve entitled this ‘The Third Person.’”

He took a deep breath, then started,

“The girl walked listlessly through the olive grove, following her long shadow up the hill. Her sun-bleached hair, deep tan, white t-shirt and shorts gave the impression of a surfer girl, but she carried no surfboard, just a towel; and a well-thumbed copy of her favorite novel, Paper Moon.

She saw the tall trees ahead, the last of the sunlight still lighting their very tips like candles on an altar. Behind them, hid the house. By the time she would get there, she knew it'd almost be dark.

But just as hot. She found the hole in the fence, crept through into the cover of the trees and watched for movement. The manicured garden was deserted. Only one room in the modern house was lit. Just like yesterday.

The pool area was dimly lit by solar lamps just bright enough for her to read by. She walked out of the shadows and dropped her towel and book on the chaise nearest the pool house, then pulled off her t-shirt and shorts, leaving only her knickers. She smiled as she slipped silently into the cool, fresh water.

She had been floating on her back for a while when she heard a banging from inside the house. She smiled briefly, but then frowned and spun on to her front, swimming to the edge closest to the house where she could hide. She peered over the edge and saw movement. The door was opening. The deck lighting turned on. A guy walked out, carrying a hammer and chisel. He was good looking, (about the same age as her, maybe early twenties) but the hammer made him menacing. He stood and surveyed the area. Could he see her towel and book on the chaise? He looked at the water, then took off his shirt and pants and walked towards the pool. She submerged herself and watched for his silhouette. It appeared above her and stopped. A hand plunged into the water and seized her arm, but she broke free and swam into the centre of the pool where she surfaced.

"What the fuck?" he said, circling the pool.

"Sorry, sorry, let me get my stuff and I'll go," she said, constantly paddling away from him.

"No. You're not going anywhere." He ran and dived straight towards her. She kicked at him but missed and he grabbed her round the waist. She squirmed, jabbing him with her elbow,

until he let go of her. But then he caught her again and they struggled, pulling them both under. They sunk to the bottom and had to release each other to swim to the top and get some air, before the tussling would begin again, repeating the same sequence. Coming up for air again, she laughed and then he did too.

She swam to the shallow end and pulled herself out, but he grabbed her again and pulled her back in. He pinned her arms to her side, and they stared at each other, exhausted. But then she kissed him, and he kissed her back. Their naked bodies glistened in the pool lights as they did a different kind of grappling.

"You're not the owner, so why are you here?" she asked between kisses.

"I'm doing some work for him while he's away," he said, "what about you?"

"It's the only pool for miles."

He laughed and kissed her,

"That's not a reason. A reason would be 'I'm sneaking in for a swim'; or 'He's my dad, I live here'; or 'He's my lover', though that'd be gross."

She laughed and rolled her eyes,

"Yeah, that'd be gross."

She shut her eyes and smiled then said,

"I live down the hill in Città, where it's hot and sweaty and everyone stinks and I just wanted to get away and cool down for a while, okay? It's not the first time, and it won't be the last." He smiled and nodded, and they continued kissing.

"I've got to go," she said as she climbed off him, "my dad will be waiting."

She dried off, put her shirt and shorts on, rolled her towel around her book, and walked into the trees,

"See you again?"

As the sun went down the girl walked into the garden and across to the pool. The guy was sitting on a chaise by the pool house, this time in swimming shorts. She waved to him and dived into the water, fully clothed. Once she was cool, she got out and sat astride him. She kissed him and pressed her wet t-shirt against him.

"I'm hungry," she said, while squirming on top of him, "can I go make a sandwich?" she could feel something going on under his shorts.

"Er," he said, slightly distracted, "I'll make you one. I think he's got ham, or cheddar, or tuna?"

"Tuna," she said, "semi-toasted, with salad and Hellman's," speeding up her gyrations.

"Semi-toasted?"

"Stuff two pieces into the toaster, so they each get brown on only one side—"

He kind of froze beneath her and looked intently at the stars.

When he'd gone inside, she waited a minute, then followed. The house was quiet, except for the kitchen, so she wandered from room to room. In a library, she found his hammer and chisel on the floor by a large safe. She realized the significance and ran, but he was standing in her way and hugged her to him. They struggled for a moment before she gave up.

"So you're not working for the owner?"

"No."

They rubbed against each other.

"You're a burglar."

"Yes."

"Not a very good one, apparently."

He shrugged,

"No. It's my first time."

"What's inside there?"

"Valuables, cash, papers . . ."

"And why aren't you worried that he's about to return?"

"I know he's away. His Bentley is parked at the airport."

They gyrated like they were dancing, but without any sound.

"And there's a sensor on the drive which rings if a car approaches."

She nodded and they kissed again, then parted.

"I want in," she said, picking up the hammer, "but we can do better than this."

She looked around the room.

"What do you bet he wrote the combination down somewhere? He's that much of a fool."

"How would you know that?" he asked.

"Er, because I've been swimming in his pool for years and he'd see me and chase me and shout at me and shoot at me and... he always came across as a fool. All the kids in Città call him the fool on the hill."

"Really."

"Yeah, listen, I've got to go now; my Mum's not well. But can I help you tomorrow and we split anything we find in there?"

"You're not going to the police are you?" he said.

"God no! This fool deserves it. And he's bound to be insured anyway."

"Cool. See you tomorrow then."

She walked out of the house, through the fence and down the hill, towards Città, its lights making it look like a bunch of Christmas decorations dropped by some passing giant. But then she veered off, out of the olive grove, into a spinney. There, hidden under a camouflaged awning, was an old campervan. She crept under, unlocked the door and climbed inside, then grabbed a couple of things and jumped back out. Once settled at a foldable table she opened a notebook and started to write:

"As the sun went down the girl walked into the garden and across to the pool. The guy was sitting..."

She liked writing about herself in the third person. It seemed to portray her character as she felt in real life; like she was hovering slightly above her own body, and that it was always five seconds behind, or ahead of what she was consciously thinking. If it was ahead, she would judge her body's choices, the words it used, its stance; if it was behind, she'd judge it for its slowness, its indecision, and its lack of maturity.

Should she write this down too?

Also, wasn't it weird the way they seemed to mostly talk when they were snogging? How could she get that across? You were meant to show stuff happening weren't you, not tell?

It was full-on midday when the girl walked up the hill. Wherever possible, she kept to the shadows of the olive trees and would stop and douse herself when the sprinklers came on intermittently.

When she arrived, she immediately dived into the pool to cool down. She towed off then found him in the library, amongst a pile of open books, systematically exploring them for a code. The house was heating up as the sun was more overhead for longer each day, so they took swimming and kissing breaks regularly. A ringing sounded by the pool. A gentle but insistent bell.

"What's that?" she asked.

"That's the alarm," he said, running into the house, "someone's turned up the drive."

"It's not him, is it? We've got to run now if it's him! He's a psycho and always has a gun on him!"

She followed him into the library where he had turned on a little portable TV. On the screen they could see a police car sending plumes of dust into the arid air.

"We've got three minutes," he said, closing the windows, then running back to the pool to collect their stuff. She locked the door once he was inside and they retreated to a bathroom near the front door, with the TV. Through the frosted glass they saw the car pull up and two figures getting out. The guy turned a knob, and the view changed to the front door. They grew in size as they approached the door, and she squeaked when she heard the doorbell. He held his hand over her mouth until they heard them walk off on a circuit of the house. He turned the knob on the TV to another camera and picked them up as they peered in through various windows.

She drew a breath in relief. She could see them both in the mirror, him behind her. She felt something hard pushing against her butt and thought it was his erection, so went to grasp it. But it was a lot colder and harder than an erection. It was a revolver. She grabbed the handle and pulled it out, pushing him away from her.

"You have a gun?" she whispered, pointing it at him.

He instinctively put up his hands.

"Be careful with that!" he hissed, then snatched it and her in one easy motion, "I found it in the library, It's loaded with dumdum bullets. They split apart on impact."

She winced,

"And you're gonna shoot a cop with it are you?"

He dropped the gun onto a pile of towels and pulled her to him.

She smiled and kissed him. He lifted her on to the sink and she encircled him with her bare legs.

They kissed again and rubbed against each other through their shorts. The bell rang again but it didn't bother her anymore, and as the policeman repeatedly pushed on the button, she felt herself coming.

She sat outside the campervan under the camo awning, drinking coffee from a tin mug. The sun was hot but hadn't reached its zenith yet. She collected her stuff, locked the door and set off up the hill.

The pool was so cool, she never wanted to get out again. He came out and joined her and they made love in the water. Made love? That was the first time she'd described it as that. Maybe it was because they hadn't chatted during proceedings?

While he was showering, she nervously headed for the kitchen. Breathing heavily, she entered the utility room and listened intently. Nothing. She stuck her ear to a wall and held her breath. Nothing. She took a deep breath and then another and tried to calm down. She went to the Aircon control panel and punched a number into a keypad. A hidden door in the wall behind her swung ajar and she nervously stuck her eye to the gap. A staircase descended into darkness, but as she opened the door, it was illuminated, revealing a body lying at the bottom. She gasped, and slumped against the door, closing it. She felt she might cry.

The guy stood in the door looking at her, holding a towel around his waist.

"What are you doing?"

She took a moment to say,

"I was trying to get the Aircon going? It's so hot in here."

He looked at her like he was trying to work her out, then turned away.

She stayed sat on the floor, a look of pain streaking across her face, or was it fear? Or self-loathing? The guy leant against the kitchen counter looking troubled. His eyes kept flitting back to the utility room. She finally emerged and they sat and ate sandwiches in silence.

Occasionally their eyes would lock, as if searching each other's minds for a secret.

"I have to leave early today," she said, going to collect her things, "see you tomorrow."

He said nothing; just nodded.

The girl walked up that hill, as though it was a mountain. She'd stayed up late reading her book, waiting to drop off, but she was unable to sleep. She'd woken, when the campervan had got too

hot for human habitation. She fell into the water and floated there for what felt like forever, as it slowly revived her.

The house was starting to look like a bomb had hit it, as he continued to upend every item. She wasn't so interested any more. She took longer swims and food breaks, more interested in her book than the search. In the pantry he found a box of photos and she jumped on them, poring through them.

"What's with the photos?" he asked, "is there something you're not telling me?"

"Is there something you're not telling me?"

He advanced on her and pushed her against the counter.

"This guy. He was not a fool. He was a violent fuck and deserved whatever happened to him," she leant forward and kissed him, then, "I think he might have photos of me swimming, and getting undressed and also . . . maybe . . ."

He waited.

"There is something I haven't told you."

"Tell me then."

"Easier to show you," she said, "wait here."

She walked to the utility room and quickly typed the code into the keypad and the door unlocked.

She called to him, and he came in and saw the door to the basement.

He took a step back in surprise then pulled it open. The stairs led into the dark. He gestured for her to follow him, but she shook her head. He started walking down then gasped. She shut her eyes and hugged herself.

He found a light switch then examined the body.

"He's been dead for a while, judging by the smell."

He eventually emerged carrying a box.

"Well, it's a full-on fucking horror show down there, but judging by these pictures, you already know that."

She took the box and rifled through the photos. They weren't all of her. There were other girls in similar situations, in similar states of bondage, in similar stages of being dehumanized, abused, fucked and sodomized . . . and some had been killed and eaten.

She looked at her photos but couldn't recognize the girl looking back at her. Her disassociation was complete. That was the third person.

She took the photos of herself and burnt them in a wok, while he watched. Then they went to the pool and swam.

"Hungry?" she asked.

"Yes."

"Come inside in five," she said swimming to the side.

She searched the house for the perfect armchair and found it in a bedroom. She carried it to the library then went to the utility room to get the roll of gaffer tape.

When he came into the house, she called him into the library, where she smashed him on the head with an iron frying pan. He half crumpled and she said, "Oh no, what have you done?" while she led him to the armchair, where he passed out.

When he awoke he was taped to the chair by his arms and legs. He struggled and shouted for her to release him.

"I knew you'd killed him," she said.

"Killed who?" he shouted.

"The owner of the house. My captor. You killed him. Had he escaped when you arrived, and you shot him?"

She waved the revolver towards him.

"I didn't kill him. I thought you did," he shouted, struggling against the tape.

"No, I didn't kill him. I just left him locked in the basement."

"Then go look at him," he screamed, "you'll see he wasn't shot."

Still carrying the gun, she walked into the utility room. It took ages to make it on to the top step of the stairs into the basement, where she'd spent far too much of her life. She sat on the step, then slowly lowered herself on to the next one.

Then the next. She kept her eyes averted from the body of her abuser. The man who threatened to kill her if she didn't do exactly as he wished?

Was this why she was what her therapist called a people pleaser? Why she'd come on to this guy from the moment they met? Because that was the only kind of relationship that she knew?

She made it to the bottom and crawled over to the body. It stank and was decomposed but it was all too clear to her that it wasn't her abuser.

It was her captor's pervy son.

She ran up the stairs and out of the utility room, breathing the fresh air in the kitchen. Then she ran back to the library to find a man standing over the guy. He turned when she heard her, but she raised the gun and fired a warning shot into the floor, creating a jagged hole the size of her fist.

"Oh, it's you darlin'," he said raising his hands, "where did you get to? I've been so worried?"

She pointed the gun at his heart and started to squeeze the trigger, but he didn't seem frightened.

"And who's this jerk? Did you find him ransacking the place and tie him up? He's very noisy isn't he? I had to tape his mouth."

She said nothing.

"Thank you anyway darlin', now put the gun down and help me clear up will you?"

She lowered the gun, because she'd always done exactly as he said, but she did it reluctantly as she knew she wasn't meant to listen anymore. She raised it again, pointing at his heart.

"I said put the gun down!"

She lowered the gun.

She raised it again, pointing at his heart.

"I said put the gun down!"

She lowered the gun.

He came towards her with his arms outstretched, smiling that smile, and she pulled the trigger and shot him in the groin.

He collapsed to the floor, screaming in agony. She advanced on him, and he tried to retreat, but his legs were useless. She could see a bloody hole where his genitals and spine used to be. She put her foot on his stomach, pressed down and he simultaneously screamed and burst into tears.

She went over to the armchair and took the tape off the guy's mouth. He smiled. Then she released one hand so he could free himself.

"Shall we have a look in the safe?" she said, crouching in front of it.

"But we never found . . ."

She punched in the same code as the Aircon and the safe opened.

"I told you he was an idiot," she said as she pulled out a pile of cash.

"What else is in here?" he asked as she scooped more stuff out. He rifled through various papers including share certificates and bearer bonds, then smiled.

He held up his Birth Certificate stating that the man on the floor was his father.

"Holy shit!" she cried.

"I wanted to use this to get him to help my mother, but I'm not sure she'd want it now. But half of all this will help."

They called an ambulance then left him lying, crying on the floor with the box of photos.

They walked down the hill together watching the sunset through the olive trees.

As they came close to her campervan, she steered him towards it, saying,

"I know we're not snogging right now, but I still have to talk to you, confess a couple of things to you." She led him into the spinney and pulled the camo off the van.

"I don't live in Città."

He smiled.

"I already knew you didn't."

"How?"

"Because I live in Città! I'd have noticed you!"

They both laughed.

"Well, I hope you find this confession as funny as the last one."

He waited for her to speak . . .

"There's a reason the cunt didn't kill me like the others."

He waited. She said nothing. He took her hands in his, and waited . . .

"Because he's my father."

"So, we're . . . "

They stood there, holding hands as the sun slowly dipped over the horizon."

Dora was stunned. Acting as Russell's transmitter was exhausting, and the story had shocked her.

She waited for a response from the Consensus, but nothing was forthcoming, and she worried that it might have been too violent, as did Russell. But finally, the reviews were in.

Even Russell could Feel the positive vibrations coming through Dora's hand.

This was how Aggy and Geidi were going to plot the Peace Rally, but I decided to make Heidi take a Scroll to LA instead"

Aggy called Earth Almighty in London and asked to speak to Heidi.

Heidi (who had been writing a poem) picked up and immediately knew who was on the line,

"Hey, welcome back."

"Thank you! Great to be back!" Aggy said, as though she was on a gameshow.

"Yeah, I really believed that. I'm hearing rumors from home. Please tell me —"

"No one was hurt – some trees got singed and a few community centers got burnt but we managed to come together in time to freeze the aggressors."

Heidi sighed and smiled, relieved for her family,

"So the freezing worked? That's amazing – it hasn't been needed in a thousand years – I'm surprised anyone knew how to do it."

"It seemed to be instinctive?" said Aggy, "but I think, if we put a bit of thought into it, we can use it not just for self-defense, and that's why I'm calling. I wanted to try an experiment but L.A is too far from Washington DC, and we don't have enough of our Kind in the capital (we're only any good as lie detectors apparently) so I thought of you."

"Sure. What can we do?"

"You're close to Parliament aren't you?"

"Yup."

"And how many of you work there?"

"A few hundred, but there's thousands of us working in various jobs all over London, and apparently a couple of Liners landed earlier and they're all descending on London as we speak.

There'll be over ten thousand of us in an hour or two."

"Awesome! Well this is what I'd like you to try . . ."

This is the scene after the Peace Rally where Sona confronts them, and reveals the truth behind the Echoes, butt I decided to postpone the reveal

They were alone on the steps and his pride and arrogance were deserting him. Sona's shoulders slumped. Dark rings encircled his little eyes,

"I need the Echoes, Heidi, I cannot live without the Echoes."

"What are the Echoes?"

"If I tell you, will you promise to help me?"

"No, but tell me anyway."

"The Echoes of Death. The souls of the Humans, leaving their bodies as they die, en masse, in war? We collect them. Harvest them. We live off them."

Heidi was dumbstruck.

"Now you promised to help me—"

Heidi shook her head,

"No, I didn't."

"But you said . . . " He tailed off as he realized his fate.

"Go away." She said.

About the Author

Having been thrown out of school with little education & no qualifications, the author went undercover to research his creations & endured twenty years of grueling drug-piggery.

By day, his 'cover' was as a storyboard artist, first in pop videos, then in advertising, where he was very picky about his clientele (Marlboro, Messerschmitt, Monsanto, Mekunto, & Mail on Sunday being his favorites).

By night, he was a comic-book artist and while still a spotty youth his comic page 'Bloodrunners' became a big hit in the UK's biggest selling monthly motorcycling magazine, Bike.

After the first year, he took a stand at the Bike Show with 1000 A4 Bloodrunners comic-book compilations, thinking they'd last a year, but they sold out in a weekend. Starring the infamous Jack Shit, Bloodrunners has proved to be Andy's 'Goose that laid the Golden Egg'.

Ten years ago, he created Jet Metal, an episodic graphic novel as seen worldwide in nine monthly motorcycling magazines in English, French, German, Spanish & Ukrainian, by an estimated 500,000 readers. Running for five years, the whole story is now available as an A4 140-page Graphic Novel

Most recently, he's taken a holiday (relative to writing and drawing to a grueling monthly deadline) and written two 'dark & disturbing' novels, inspired by his life of excess and his decades of recovery in London's Narcotics Anonymous meetings: "I'm Keeping the Head", and "The Reluctant Torturer" are part of a planned series of Artemis Grime mystery thrillers. He is working on a third, and on illustrations for the whole series.

He has a new page starting in a venerable Monthly Motorcycle Magazine in October, but we cannot reveal the title just yet, as ~~rivals are stalking him, waiting for their moment to strike and take~~ all the contract has not been signed.

This Andy Sparrow should not be confused with his cave-dwelling namesake, who also sells books on . . . caving. This Andy Sparrow has never entered a cave. Not because of claustrophobia, nor nyctophobia, but for a nagging fear of a large heavy object falling on his head. This also makes walking in built up areas quite difficult.

He lives near the beach in West Sussex, but still won't take off his crash helmet.

Cast of Characters

Aggy, Conduit. The girl who went home. Aggy's Mum is called Alli

Tiggy and Zooey, Conduits. Work for Russell on Earth Almighty's best-selling soap, Shandling's Castle. In many ways they are interchangeable (but for god's sake don't tell them I said that!) as they are a couple and look very similar.

Heidi, Conduit. Works in the London Offices of Earth Almighty, scouting talent.

Nova, female, one of the Taller. Runs the Hollywood branch of Earth Almighty.

Betty, Conduit. Nova's servant.

Magga, female, one of the Taller. Nova's best friend. Runs 'News for the Blues', Earth Almighty's monopoly on news for North, Middle & South America plus parts of Western Europe.

Sona, male, one of the Taller. Runs the London branch of Earth Almighty.

Gordo, Forko, Zoka, males, members of the Taller. Runs various branches of Earth Almighty.

Russell. Creator, writer and Showrunner on Shandling's Castle. His massive brain is wasted on thinking up new ways to prolong a family feud and intertwining sub-plots. Watch out for his Great American Novel, out next year.

Jen, Russell's wife. Recovering addict.

Gus (disGUSting, to his friends) king of porno at the one-one-six.

Glossary

The Taller. They are the people who run Earth Almighty (and also act as ‘consultants’ in Governments and Defense), who bought (relative) prosperity back to the world by breaking the monopolies of the Tech Billionaires, and creating their own.

Conduits (also known to themselves as ‘our Kind’). The people who have a special talent for being able to record actors’ feelings, then transmit those feelings to others for the enhancement of the show they are watching.

Feel, as opposed to feel. Conduits can Feel what’s going on inside the actors, all their emotions, physical pain, fear, resentment. They can also Record it, and Play it back later.

Exchange. Conduits like to hug one another. When touching, they can immediately ‘know’ another of their Kind, and vice versa.

Circles. Conduits meet and sit in Circles. The benefits of this are similar to people in Recovery who go to Twelve Step Meetings – Meeting with like-minded people who you can share your joy with, or dump your problems on. Also, you can catch up on all the gossip and go for coffee afterwards.

Scrolls can transport you across the world instantly. Very handy for that emergency meeting in New York, or catching your wife cheating on you in Lanzarote.