

The Vaccine Slaves

By

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Prologue

If I were to take the gag out of your mouth, what would you say to me?

What would you offer me for your freedom?

Money, of course, because even now money equals power, and power is an end in itself when you have nothing else to believe in. Unfortunately for you, after all the horrors I've seen, I'm soaked to the bone with belief.

How about women? Without doubt you'd offer women, whatever my fetish, no questions asked, as though they were objects, commodities, something that might have been traded on the stock exchange — if such a thing were still to exist. You'd offer me whole warehouses of your caged females just to cut the cable ties trapping your ankles to the chair and binding your wrists behind your back.

Sorry, I'm not looking for a harem at the moment.

I wouldn't say I'm unimpeachable, but you have no peaches that are of interest to me.

You've really done well out of the Medusa virus, haven't you? And other men like you. But here's the thing. Despite what you preached in public, those sound bites that slithered so easily from your lips, Medusa has proved that sexual equality was a lie, a myth that suited all men and some women — primarily those in Western countries who could go through their lives without being raped, beaten, and treated like a slave.

In reality, the relationship between men and women was like the old *special relationship* between America and Britain: they pretended to share power, but the truth is one was violent and overbearing and the other pandered to this in the hope of being protected when it all went to shit.

Well it's all gone to shit now, and there ain't much going on by way of protection.

See these shivs — I made them from old bed springs. I've skewered more worthless flesh with these than a rat kebab seller in Trafalgar Square. I could prise off your kneecap with a sharpened point, ease one into your ear until the drum pops, stab a second hole in your windpipe and watch your eyes go wild as most of your breath leaks out before it gets to your lungs.

All she asked is that I keep you alive.

She didn't specify the condition you needed to be in.

1. Infected

I was infected again, some new mutation of the Medusa virus, and running out of options. I'd tried getting vax from the usual places, but the latest spate of government crackdowns on vaccine slaves meant the black market had run dry. That's why I was heading to Finn's Farm, base for the Blades, a gang so notorious you could spot them from their gory tattoos — blood bubbling from a dagger plunged to the hilt in the hollow of a throat, a forearm sliced from wrist to elbow to show the bones hiding inside the parted pink flesh. These were not nice people to visit. But what choice did I have? I was desperate.

I'd never had dealings with the Blades before, and I didn't want to get ripped off. So, I slicked back my washrag of filthy hair, picked the larger bugs out my beard, and wore this mint-condition Armani blazer, cocoa brown with pale blue pinstripes, scavenged only a month ago from a derelict mansion near Maldon. Unfortunately, beneath the blazer, I had little in the way of decent threads, just layers of dirty rags leading down to a pair of Adidas jogging bottoms, flared at the ankle and cinched round the middle with rope. Judging by the size of the waistband, they were once owned by a man maybe three times as wide as me.

It was early October, the clouds low and looming with rain. I turned my go-cart off the old A12 and onto a gravelly slip road leading to the farm. As I slowed down, the vapour trail of sweaty armpits and stewed groin I'd been leaving in my wake settled around me. You know you smell bad when you can smell yourself. At least I had my blazer.

I had another reason for dressing that way, but I'll come to that.

Finn's Farm was not how I imagined. I'd pictured rundown barns, weed-choked fields, mobsters in leather jackets pretending to be farmers by chewing on wheat. Instead I came around the last bend to find a crowded car park. Military jeeps, two-seater coupes, four-by-fours with polished paintwork and gleaming bull bars. A pristine shop, fronted with plate glass, appeared to be selling tyres, while beside it the cast of what looked like a particularly brutal prison drama — all scars and tats and foreheads designed to crumple your nose — milled around the forecourt of an open-fronted warehouse busy with plastic-wrapped palettes of electronic goods. Televisions, iPads, all kinds of stuff you never saw these days, and which you probably wouldn't be able to power up even if you did. I parked my cart besides a canary yellow, showroom condition Lotus Elise. The price of petrol these days, if you could buy it at all, no one was driving their new sports cars to the countryside to buy tyres.

That meant one thing: vaccine.

“Speak to the blokes outside the warehouse,” Smokes had said to me back at The Herb. “Ask for Mike.”

Usually I wouldn't trust my life to someone like Smokes, but I needed the vax. The skin on my hands and feet was hardening. It wouldn't be long, maybe days, before Medusa spread over my body, onto my face. When that happened, I was bound to get picked up. By the time I started to fissure, I'd already be on the boat to the Jersey penal colony. And they don't do return journeys from Jersey.

I weaved between the vehicles to the warehouse, trying not to touch any of them in case I set off an alarm. A breeze picked up, carrying with it a diesel stink. When I got to the forecourt, I hung around the edge, toeing a line of cracked white paint and watching the

men unload palettes, feeling stupidly conspicuous in my blazer. I needed to get someone's attention, but how?

Fortunately, my appearance did the hard work. Blazer or not, I clearly wasn't one of the Blades, not unless they were heading up a new hobo division. Soon some scrawny guy in a leather biker waistcoat was gangster-limping towards me. Silver studs lined his cheekbones. Tattoos of blood-tipped barbed wire curled beside his ears. An old viral fissure scar gouged a line from his chin to his ear. His nose, however, was something else. And by *else*, I mean horrible. Wooden rings, an inch in diameter, lifted and widened each nostril, so from every angle you got a view of pink sinewy cartilage, crusted with a grey grime that soon became clear was the residue of too much amphetamine. Guess the guy liked fat lines.

He started up a fast sales patter — “What you need, pal? What you want? You need drugs? Bitches? Vax? We got the lot. You stick with me and I'll sort you out. You've come to the right place, pal. We got everything here. Everything you want.”

“Mike,” I replied, and cleared my throat, feeling a bit daft for using the code word. “I've come to see Mike.”

“Mike? *Mike?*” He started a laugh that turned into a smoker's cough, and slapped his chest with his hand. His fingernails were filed into daggers. Fucking Smokes, why did I listen to someone like him? Nostrils read my expression. “Don't worry, pal. Don't you worry. You're in the right place. Mike's here.” He slid off the point of his index finger around a wooden nose ring, narrowing his eyes, like were co-conspirators in some scam. “British girls only. Scouts honour. None of that coon shit here. You don't want none of that coon vaccine. Only good for monkeys.” He swung his arms low and went *oob-oob-oob*.

I did not need this. But you can't say, *excuse me, do you mind if I speak to some other murderous thug about buying illegal vaccine?* So, I smiled and laughed at his racist bile, and kept the images of stamping his head into the forecourt to myself.

"Come," he said, beckoning me with a claw.

When he turned to lead the way, I checked my weapons, the real reason for how I was dressed — a touch to the razors sown into the lapel of the blazer, to the spring-loaded blade strapped to my arm beneath the sleeve, a tap of my heel to the hunting knife sheathed beneath the flared ankle of my jogging bottoms. I was far from a ruthless killer, not back then. But I wasn't a complete sap either. You don't turn up to the Blade's with a sob story and a bunch of daisies.

"Who told you about Mike?" Nostrils asked as he led me through the warehouse.

I was following, eyes wide and mouth parted, unable to comprehend all the goodies loaded on the metal shelves, stuff I hadn't seen for years. Heinz Tomato Ketchup, Dove Face Wash, Twelve-Year-Old Glenfiddich.

"Guy I know," I murmured.

"Which guy."

"Some guy."

Nostrils stopped, spun round. His expression was tight. "Tell me, or fuck off."

I figured I owed Smokes nothing. He was just someone at The Herb, barely an acquaintance. So, I told Nostrils his name.

He shrugged. "Never heard of the cunt."

We carried on through the warehouse. A shaven-headed slab who, aside from the line of gunshot tattoos running over his scalp, was indistinguishable from the concrete he'd been leaning against caught a slight nod from Nostrils. Slab shoved from the wall and followed up the rear.

The sweat under my rags turned to frost.

This was trouble.

These two goons were going to grind me into paste. I felt like pounding my forehead with the heel of my hand for bringing my gold. Nestled in the inside pocket of my blazer was a nugget the size of a fingertip, worth at least twenty pounds, pretty much all the profits from the turpentine I'd sold so far. I should have run. No excuses, just legged it. I started every day with an hour-long jog around the perimeter of The Herb, so could have beat them back to my cart. That's if they even gave chase. Most likely they'd have pissed themselves laughing while I sprinted away.

The thing was, I needed vaccine. That over-ruled everything, even my intuition, which right then had its arms around my ankle, pleading with me to get the fuck out of there.

I followed Nostrils through a door at the back of the warehouse, into a dingy service corridor musty with rat droppings, past some stairs, around a corner, the shouts and clatters from the warehouse getting quieter the further away we went. He stopped at a door and rapped on it with a single knuckle. Nothing. He smiled past me to the slab behind, and pushed the handle down. It opened into a narrow store room. Couple of rickety chairs, an abandoned dominoes game on an upturned crate, some bulging garbage bags oozing brown sludge. A vegetable stench only a fly could love. The kind of place you take someone when you want to kill them with just a little privacy.

We went inside. Nostrils turned to me, licking his twitching lips. In the dull light, a single bulb close to burnout, his pupils were large and black. "All right, okay, let's do this. Let's do this." He blew out his cheeks. "What you need? What you want?"

Behind me, the big goon locked the door.

I reminded him — "Vax."

“Yeah, yeah, yeah, that’s right, that’s right, you want some vax. Got a dose of the old ‘dusa have you? Touching some tramps without rubbering up.” He flapped his tongue at me, cunnilingus style. I struggled to keep my revulsion in check. He made a show of appraising me. “I could give you the shit, but a bloke like you? You want the best. Right? *Right?* You want the best? Am I right?”

“Sure,” I said. “The best.”

I wasn’t getting the best.

He brought a sharpened nail up to his nose and poked around the scummy cartilage. “You want the best, you got to pay for the best. You get me?”

Oh, I got him. I got him only too well. At least we were still going through the motions — they could easily just slice my throat and be done with it. I was sport, entertainment, a way to pass a dull work day. A mouse being patted about by two nasty, tattooed cats.

Even so, I wasn’t giving up hope. Nothing bad had happened yet — I could still get out of here with both my life and some vaccine. I fished around my tracksuit bottoms, pulling out a couple of unused ration books.

Nostril snorted. “Try again, pal.”

“I’ve got money.”

“How much?”

I jogged my blazer, making the coins in the pocket jangle. “Two pounds in fifties.”

He was nibbling ferociously on his bottom lip, going for shred of skin, getting it between his teeth and pulling back, leaving a red strip of flesh behind. He dabbed at the blood that followed with his tongue. “Go on,” he said. “What else you bring? What you holding out on me, *pal?*”

I made a snap decision — either they were going to find it, or I was going to give it to them anyway — and got the gold out of my inside pocket. When I held it out, Nostrils' bombsite of a face exploded with glee.

“Get in,” he said, snatching it from my hand.

I groaned inside. Months of tapping trees to make the turps — boiling the sap, scalding myself a hundred times — gone in a second. There was a life lesson here, somewhere. Maybe I'd think about it, if I somehow managed to make it out alive.

Grinning like a cat who'd just been given the keys to the cream factory, Nostrils stepped backwards to some shelves near the garbage bags. He made a deal of rooting around, and came back with a grubby white tub. I didn't need to look hard at the purple strips of flesh, clearly from a kidney or a liver, to know it wasn't vaccine. Fresh vaccine needs to be refrigerated, otherwise the proteins die. Plus, it looks exactly as it is: a segment of placenta, thick as tripe, the blood on it crimson fresh.

“Get stuck in,” he said, holding out the tub. It reeked of a backstreet butcher's shop.

As calmly as possible, I told him that wasn't vaccine.

He shook the tub, like he was offering peanuts at a party. “Use it or lose it.”

"Thanks, but no thanks, okay?"

"What's the problem?"

"Please," I said. "I don't want any trouble."

Nostrils glanced over my shoulder. I felt Slab's presence right behind me. “No trouble for us.”

“Just give me back my gold, and—”

“I got you vaccine.”

“That's not vaccine.”

Nostrils bounced on his heels, smiling viciously. “You calling me a liar?”

Here we go.

“Listen...” I began, but I didn’t get any further.

“You want your gold? Why don’t you... get on your knees, and beg.”

This was going bad, fast. I weighed up my options — should I get the crap kicked out of me standing up, or kneeling down? Kneeling would buy me more time, so I eased myself to the floor. Looking up at him, I swallowed a retch at the mess going on in his nose — all the smears of speed and yellowy crusts of snot. There’s a reason why it’s so hard to see inside one, and it was standing over me, claws out.

I spoke slowly, but, I hoped, with fortitude. “Please. Can I have my gold back?”

Nostrils sniggered hard, like I’d just shared a hilarious joke. “You can have it. But you’ve got to do something for me first.”

“What?” I replied.

He held the tub before my face. “Eat it.”

I reeled back from the putrid meat. Up close, I saw the purple sheen across the surface. It was already going rotten. If I ate it, it might well kill me, but only after I’d vomited my entire insides over the store room floor.

Behind me, Slab grunted out a laugh. “Good one,” he said.

“You’ve got to be kidding,” I replied.

“You eat it,” Nostrils said, “and you leave here with your gold. Can’t say fairer than that, can I?”

I’d already lost enough in my life. What was one more nugget of gold?

“Keep it,” I said, offering up a smile I hoped looked sincere. “Please, just let me go.”

He lowered himself until his face was close enough for me to see the grime on the undersides of his cheek studs. When he spoke, his breath stank worse than the meat —

“I said. Eat. It.”

He straightened up, sniggering again, lips spasming into a sneer, and thrust the pot at my mouth.

I imagined chewing on the cold, rubbery flesh, the smell of it already lining my tongue with a vile taste. Even if I managed to force it down, there was no guarantee they'd let me go.

By the garbage bags, a couple of roaches were lovingly brushing antennas. From behind came the sound of many knuckles cracking.

What choice did I have?

Slowly, I reached for the first strip. But before my hand got to the tub, I pulled my sleeve back, revealing the spring-loaded blade attached to my arm, the point of which was less than a foot from his groin.

Nostrils glanced down. He did a double take, and muttered, "Oh, *shit*."

"So," I said. "What now?"

2. Girl

Of all the terrible things I've seen in the five years since the Medusa virus ripped apart the world, do you want to know the worst?

Let me tell you.

Disembowelled women, pregnant or otherwise, were being found by the hundred every day. The curfews, the army in the street, not even the rushed return of capital punishment could stem the violence. Back then, scientists around the world were still hopeful about creating a vaccine — one that didn't involve real women — but they weren't going fast enough. In every country, millions had already died. The world wasn't teetering on collapse, it was tumbling, head over heels, into an abyss.

I didn't want to hang around to see what was waiting at the bottom.

Angela, however, saw things differently. She agreed it wasn't safe to stay in our basement apartment in Finsbury Park, which we'd been living in since we got married, but instead wanted us to hand ourselves in as refugees. Apparently, there were rapidly expanding, supposedly secure, encampments set up all over the country.

Everything will get back to normal, she said. It has to. In the meantime, at least we'll be safe.

She placed a hand over her stomach — she barely even had a bump.

The three of us, she said.

I wasn't so sure. I didn't like the idea of being trapped. Plus, the media — what little there was left — reported all manner of horrors going on in the camps. My uncle had a log cabin in the woods near Oxford I used to stay at when I was a kid, and my plan was for us to head there. It wasn't a great place — generous, you'd call it rustic — but it was remote. And we'd be free.

If we'd become refugees, would Angela still be alive today? Would our child? Even now, I ask myself those questions. But that's the thing about regret. It fills your soul like

the stink of rot in a damp house. No matter how many windows you open, it never goes completely. You just get used to the smell.

The truth is, she was probably right. Not long after we went on the run, the ‘fake placenta’ was invented — essentially a balloon covered in a sponge — and the hunt for the cure became sidelined in favour of sticking that thing into as many women as possible, and pumping them full of enough hormones to simulate pregnancy. Actual pregnant women like Angela became a protected species. In the camps, we would have been taken somewhere safe. Her voice still visits me, most days, to call me a bloody idiot for not listening to her.

Anyway. I could berate myself about this all day. Back to the story, the worst thing I’ve seen.

By then, bikes were the best way to get around. The trains were barely running; the roads, snarled with dead cars. We loaded up as much as we could carry from our home, and headed out the moment curfew ended at five.

We made good progress, getting most of the way to Oxford by midday, but Angela was exhausted. Even before the pregnancy, she wasn’t into fitness, preferring cosmopolitans to calisthenics, throwing shapes in clubs to medicine balls at the gym. Also, I worked as a personal trainer. So, when we stopped for a break, in a copse of firs near the A40, I’d barely broken sweat. Angela on the other hand lay on the leaves, lifted her long legs onto a fallen bough, crossed her arms and grimaced. I knew the signs. Neither of us wanted a row — she still thought we were making a mistake — so I said I’d give her five, and went for a wander.

I didn’t go far before I found the girl.

It looked as though she was sitting up against a tree. I saw her from behind, her bare leg sticking out, her small hand beside it, palm up. I could tell by the length of her fingers she was young, ten at the most. There was a smell — sour, ripe, like rotting

oranges — but we were in the woods. All kinds of freaky smells around. I didn't want to scare her, so, as softly as possible, I called, "Hey? You okay?"

She didn't respond, so I crept round the tree to get a better look.

At first, I couldn't understand what I was seeing – the congealed, burgundy slop on her lap, the limp, pink curtains where her stomach should have been. Then I got it. From sternum to groin, she had been ripped up the middle. Not cut, like with a knife, but torn. With hands.

Ants moved in lines over her pale skin, up her arms and neck, like veins pulsing with black blood.

She was too young to be pregnant, but they killed her anyway. They dumped out her insides, and rummaged through her like she was a kitchen cupboard. My mind became a glassy surface of revulsion that sanity couldn't grip. When Angela found me, I was on my knees, hands pressed to my cheeks, hypnotised by the horrific scene.

That girl still makes a regular cameo in my nightmares.

Perhaps that explains why, five years later, I helped Cea to escape from the Blades.

3. Alarm

Back when I was trying – and failing – to get vaccine from the Blades, I cared about one thing: survival. I'll clarify that. My survival. If you needed help, I was *not* your man. As far as I was concerned, damsels in distress could stay in distress. And could they keep their wails of anguish down a bit, please?

Sure, society was 'rebuilding', but for people like me, living in the wild, without ID, it was a tough, tough world. Who was there to save me if I needed saving? Roach, my neighbour at The Herb? Since his accident, he couldn't even walk straight. The other men there? They were too busy fending for themselves. No, my life consisted of my dog, Daisy, and me. Everyone else could go fry.

Out there, just like in here, with two thugs hoping to while away a boring afternoon forcing me to eat rotting offal, I was on my own.

Keeping the spring-loaded blade aimed at Nostrils' crotch, I turned my body to see the big guy.

"Back up," I said, hoping they didn't pick up the waver in my voice. "Or I start handing out free castrations."

The slab didn't move.

"Easy G," Nostrils said, giving him the eyes.

"Like I give a fuck," he replied.

Shit.

Slab lunged for me. I swung my arm at him and dropped my wrist to fire the blade. It slipped from the holding and clattered to the floor.

Double shit.

I must have tested that a hundred times, thudding knife after knife into the oak behind my cottage. Now wasn't the time to ponder my rubbish mechanics. I launched myself at the big guy, jabbing twice. He blocked, but that opened his side. I landed a right hook by his ear that reverberated up to my shoulder. I may as well have been a makeup artist dabbing him with rouge. He swung, I ducked.

Nostrils was advancing, nails out. Slab grabbed the lapel of my blazer — and got a handful of razor blades. He reared back, face wide with pain, holding the wrist of his slashed hand. Blood sluiced from his fingers, down his arm. I dragged my tracksuit leg up, snatched the hunting knife from my ankle sheath and swung it at him, catching him on the side of the neck. I must have nicked his carotid artery. His polo shirt became soaked with blood. I stared at him, stunned, as the wound glogged. He stared back like he was trying to remember the name of someone famous. His hand went halfway to his throat, but didn't quite get there. He staggered sideways, going down, the small room filling with the stench of shit as his bowels gave way.

Back then, I didn't think of myself as a killer. I knew how to defend myself, but I carried weapons mainly to wave at assailants in the hope they left me alone. I never looked for trouble. Maybe that explains why I didn't do what I should have done, there, in that store room. Something that would have saved me a load of trouble down the line.

I didn't kill Nostrils.

To be honest, watching the big guy's body jerking, his eyelids fluttering, the red still pouring out his slashed throat, it was all I could do not to throw up. I aimed the knife at Nostrils, aware my hand was shaking, but unable to stop it. He was poised, claws up.

“On your knees,” I said.

He was working out whether he could take me. I made to lunge. He pulled back his hands.

“Okay, okay,” he said. “Take it easy.”

“Knees. *Now.*”

He started to say something, but I didn’t have time to hang around for his words of wisdom. I stepped in fast and sucker-punched him in the solar plexus. He dropped, breathless. I shucked off my jacket, stood on it, ripped off a sleeve, pulled his arms behind his back while he was still gasping for breath, and used it to tie his wrists. Shame, I liked that blazer. I tied his legs with the other sleeve, and snatched a rag from my armpit. He bucked and snapped his teeth as I tried to shove it in his mouth

“I’ll find you,” he hissed. “And when I do I’ll gouge out your eye and hate fuck your brain!”

"Well, it's nice to have things to look forward to," I replied, and bounced his head off the concrete wall.

I stuffed his mouth with the armpit rag, tied another round his head to keep it in place, and frisked him for my gold. When I found it, I put it back in my inside pocket. I tried to refit the misfired knife back into the mechanism on my arm, but it kept sliding off. I didn’t have time for this! I needed to get out of there. Speaking of which — how *was* I going to get out? The forecourt was too busy, especially with the big guy’s blood coating my hand. I remembered we passed some stairs on the way here. They would have to do. I just hoped they led to an exit.

I fished the key from the slab’s jeans and quietly unlocked the door. I edged it open and peered round. All clear. I darted into the corridor, back to the wall, on tip-toes to the stairs. No one saw me. I hurried down them into a large, desolate basement. Flickering strip lights, graffitied pillars. Broken furniture was scattered around. From above came the faint clunks of forklift legs hitting the warehouse floor. At first I was relieved — there *had* to be a way out — but within minutes that relief faded into despair. The loading bay door was locked. The fire exit door didn’t have the bar.

I was trapped.

How the hell did this happen? Of all the dumb fucking situations. To make it worse, all too typically, I had no one to blame but myself. Same as when I picked up this latest infection. I'd been in Southend — where else? — with a couple of the guys from The Herb, to celebrate selling some of the turps. At some point during the inevitable oblivion, ten times wasted, I must have gone off on my own to find somewhere to crash. I woke in a suburban bedroom. Bare floorboards, stained mattress, fitted wardrobes gutted of clothes. A little derelict, but I'd stayed in worse.

Then I saw the viscous yellow virus stains over the walls.

The sticky residue was on my hands, my neck, my cheeks. I must have touched the walls moving around the room in the dark. Living like I did, I always had little cuts, patches of raw skin, it was part of living like I did, so without doubt I was infected. Complete rookie mistake. All I could do was pray it was a strain of Medusa I'd had before.

The hardening skin on my hands and feet told me there was no one up there listening.

I was about to head back out of the basement, look for another way, when I heard a sound that rolled my guts in broken glass. An alarm, like a fire alarm. Shrill and insistent.

Nostrils had got free. Or someone had found him. Either way, they were after me. I scanned for hiding places, saw a couple of rubbish bags against a pillar. Could I hide in the darkest corner, tip the contents over myself, and pretend to be a pile of trash? If that was the best plan I could come up with, I didn't rate my chances of getting away. Then I saw it — the air vent, a rusty circular grill midway up the back wall. I couldn't — *could I?* My mind flashed with images of getting lost, or stuck, and very slowly, very horribly

dying of dehydration. The sound of the alarm was a power drill burrowing through my brain. What choice did I have?

I found an unbroken chair, stood on it, and slid my fingers between the metal slats. The plaster surrounding it looked in poor condition, crumbling around the frame of the vent. Trying not to topple backwards, I pulled until the metal cut into my fingers. The front came off. I ran to hide it behind the rubbish bags, thinking if they searched down here and saw the vent by the open duct they'd know I'd gone that way. Then I hoisted myself inside, and began to crawl.

It'd been dark enough in the basement. Once in the ducts, that meagre light didn't last long. Soon enough it was complete black. I shuffled forward, the metal walls touching me on all sides, my scared whimpers bouncing off them and back to me. I tried to hold down the claustrophobia swelling inside. It was too hot. I was sweltering in my blazer. How did vents work anyway? Did they just go round and round the building? I got to an uphill incline. To the right I felt an opening. I took it. Some way along, the air started getting hotter. The metal too. It seared my palms. I wished I still had my sleeves to shield my hands. Soon it was unbearable to the touch. I started to panic and tried to turn, but the tunnel was way too tight. I couldn't catch my breath. I was freaking out. I scrambled backwards. My blazer snagged on something. I couldn't move. I managed to shrug it off, but must have caught my arm on a razor in the lapel, because suddenly a sharp pain tore past my wrist. I grabbed the wound, warm blood wetting my fingers, terrified I'd accidentally committed suicide, which would have been hilarious — *man dies in air vent while removing his jacket* — were it not happening to me. This really was a special skill of mine. Taking already crappy situations and somehow making them worse.

After a few minutes, I realised I probably wasn't bleeding to death. Carefully now, I eased myself backwards until I got to the turn. Guess I was heading uphill. I dragged myself up using the rivets on the walls and floor, hoping my boots had enough tread on

the worn soles to stop me slipping back down. Finally, the duct flattened. I collapsed, dripping sweat, breathless. And then remembered — the gold. In my inside pocket. Of the blazer I'd left at the bottom of the incline. Well, wasn't that just the fucking cherry atop the shitcake of my life.

I carried on along the tunnel. What else could I do? I didn't have the energy to go back down, then up again. At least the alarm had faded into the distance. I passed a turn, and ignored it. I passed another ten minutes later and ignored that too. The tunnel curved, ruining my idea that at some point, eventually, it had to end in another vent. Next turn I got to, I took. Finally, I saw something. A slight granulation of the dark. I pressed on, found a turn to the right. Down it the light had a definite charcoal hue. I took it, shuffling along until I got to a meshed ceiling panel above what looked like a small office. I waited, breath held, ear pressed to the panel. Silence. I pushed with my elbows until it popped off and clattered onto a desk.

I dropped down. Four desks, couple of filing cabinets, some bulky computers that would have been retro even before the collapse. No one around. I was filthier than ever, my rags so covered with dirt it looked as though I'd been working for a chimney sweep — as the broom. The tetanus microbes having a party in the gash on my arm all waved hello. Plus, I was pretty sure I'd never walk upright again. On the positive side, the alarm was now only a few decibels loud.

Cracking a gap in the dusty venetian blinds, I saw a stretch of grass leading to the trees. They were maybe fifty metres away. The edge of the car park was to the right. I must have gone over the top of the shop.

I crept into the corridor. Peeling marigold walls, squares of scratchy carpet. The sign for the fire escape was at one end. I rushed towards it, through the open doorway, down the stairs, two at a time, three floors to the basement, where I whooped with relief at the sight of the silver door and those four glorious words: *Push bar to open.*

This time, thankfully, there was a bar.

I took a second. Breathed in and out. That was way, way, way too close.

I pushed the bar. The mechanism clicked, but nothing happened. I crouched by the lock and pushed the bar again. The metal tongue slid in. Why didn't the door open? Had someone nailed it shut from the other side? What if there was a fire? I mean, seriously, *what was the point of a fire door that didn't open!*

The adrenaline gushed out of my body, puddling into pointlessness on the floor. The whole farm would be after me by now. I didn't know much about gangs, but I had a pretty good idea you didn't kill one of their own then saunter away in your own good time.

I dropped to my knees, and clanged the door with the side of my fist while cycling through every curse I knew, and some I invented on the spot.

"If you want them to know you're here," went a young girl's voice from the shadows under the stairs, "then keep on banging."

4. Angels

I spun on my knees like someone had jabbed me in the spine with a cattle prod. I scanned the darkness under the stairs. A young girl stepped out. She was small, just under five foot. Lot of hair. I couldn't see her face because the emergency light on the back wall made her almost a silhouette. It cast an amber glow around her head.

“Who're you?” she asked.

Somewhat stupidly, I replied, “Who're you?”

Who did I think she was? Some junkie come to score meths from the Blades? Clearly, she'd been kidnapped, either to make vaccine, or more likely to sell as a vaccine slave. From her size and the sound of her voice, I guessed she was early teens. The younger they were, the higher the level of Dragin — the hormone produced by pregnant women that cures Medusa. Virgins were more valuable than a dog that shits gold turds. You could probably buy half of Scotland with what a Qatari prince would pay for her.

In other words, she was bad news.

I tried to scramble to my feet, but my back still hadn't forgiven me for the vents, so instead I half-lumbered, half-stumbled to the stairs.

She came after me. “Wait. You've got to help me.”

Facing her in the light, I saw her clearly. And what I saw was *money*. It wasn't just her clothes, a big-buttoned beige wool coat that went down to her knees, and beneath that a navy blue chiffon blouse that even I could see looked expensive, but her skin too. From an explosion of ginger hair splashed a small, *blemish-free* face.

Girls and women can't become infected with Medusa — although almost all now carry the virus — but that doesn't mean they're immune to the effects of the world around them. Look at me. Forget the old fissure scars, forget the cracked patches of irreparably damaged epidermis that make me look like a recently excavated mosaic. My

appearance carries the physical aftershocks of malnutrition, intestinal parasites, all the fleas and lice and worms that have used my body for years as their favourite holiday destination. I'm not much past thirty, but I could probably pass for double that. Even my ravages have ravages.

But this girl... it looked like she'd never even skipped a meal, let alone forced down a chunk of pigweed bread in the hope it gave you enough strength to last another day.

"You're not one of them," she said.

"Look..."

She reached for me — I flinched, as though touching her would mean I had to help her.

"Please," she said. "I need to get out of here."

"You and me both," I muttered.

Don't get me wrong. In normal circumstances, I would've gladly helped her. But these weren't normal circumstances. They weren't even abnormal circumstances. They were goodbye-cruel-world circumstances — and I wasn't quite ready to say *so long* to existence. Besides, if I started helping her, then I'd be obliged to carry on helping her, and now was not the time to make those kinds of commitments.

"Look," I said again, and lifted my shoulders, palms out, like we'd already both resigned ourselves to going our separate ways. "I'm not the best person—"

Her face fell open in disbelief. "You can't leave me here."

"*I don't know how to get out!*" I cried, pointing to the fire door.

The alarm was still ringing in the distance. I tried to show in my face that my helplessness was not an act. I really wasn't much use to her.

"I've got it," she said. "Follow me."

"Got what? What have you got?"

She scampered up the stairs. I spotted her pristine pink Converse boots. Not just money, but serious money. I'm no mercenary — money's never a good enough reason for me to run *towards* danger — but nor was I going to turn away opportunity. I'd lost my gold, and still needed vax. If she lived locally, I was sure her family would be *very* grateful if I returned her unharmed.

Maybe I'm underselling myself. Maybe I would have helped any old urchin get away.

Maybe it's best I didn't have to find out.

We came out at the ground floor. She led us down a corridor, to a swing door, which opened into a reception. Like the girl, it seemed to have come through the collapse of the civilized world unscathed. Biro's stood in a blue plastic tub on the reception desk, waiting to be used. Farmer's Weekly magazines lay spread on the coffee table by the comfortably shabby leather sofa, ready to be leafed through, probably while Bill from sales finished milking the cows. I hurried to the exit. It led out of the side of the building, near to the car park, but still out of view. The trees were close. I could sprint there in seconds. Then good luck finding me.

"Don't bother," she said. "It's locked."

I gave the doors a shake. Security glass in a steel frame. Not much chance of busting through.

She squeezed her forehead. "Think, *think*."

I tried to keep the exasperation out of my voice. "Think *what?*"

The alarm carried on ringing. They were still looking for me, and as long as I was on the farm, they had a good chance of finding me.

I spotted a water cooler in the corner. My mouth was parched, my head throbbing. I rushed over to it, praying for even a dribble. You don't realise how hard it is to find good quality water until it stops coming out of the taps. And don't get me started on collecting rain — no matter where you position the container, there's always at least one bird shit floating on top. Who wants to drink bird shit water? Not me! Of course, the cooler was dry. I kicked it in frustration. Why was I even following this girl? I didn't have time for—

“This way,” she said, and hurried back through the swing door.

This was ridiculous. I almost didn't go after her, but it was either that or run around aimlessly on my own.

We doubled back towards the stairs and through a door into a large, open-plan office. “This is it,” she said, and headed between the desks. I rushed after her. We went down a hallway lined with toilet cubicles, male, female and disabled, and into a kitchen. Couple of wooden tables, empty vending machine, smell of stale milk. Then I saw it, the door, just a normal door — not a security or fire door — with a wooden frame, leading out.

The wood was warped beneath the flaking paint. Through the pebbled glass, dark green smudges marked the nearby trees. I kicked the lock. On the third try, the frame splintered and the door swung open. In your face, certain death!

Outside, the alarm was a dull trill. The side of the building kept us hidden from the car park. The trees weren't far. I'd have to ditch the cart. That may seem like nothing in return for getting away, but I'd built it myself from scrap, even converting an old lawn mower engine to run on ethanol. For me, that was impressive. Before the collapse an actual monkey would have had a better chance than me of correctly using a monkey wrench.

The girl looked at me expectantly. I lifted my hand — *keep quiet* — then beckoned her to follow as I crept along the side of the building. I peered around the corner. My stomach dropped through a chute, hitting my bowls with a thud. The same men I'd seen at the warehouse were swarming over the car park, peering into the backs of jeeps, beneath sports cars.

Reward be damned. I needed to get out of here — faster than this kid could run.

She glanced at me. *What now?*

I replied with an apologetic frown.

She grabbed my wrist, eyebrows high, shaking her head and mouthing, *no, no, please.*

I placed my hand on hers — and removed it from my arm.

“Head for the trees,” I said. “Don’t look back. Stick to one direction and you’ll go the furthest in the shortest time. They’ll weave. They’ll think they’re covering the biggest area.”

“No, no, no, no—”

I peeked at the car park again. Still no one looking this way. I wanted to explain that if it weren’t for all the huge dudes looking to make a ladder out of my limbs, I’d go slow for her, but what was the point? I half-turned to her, shrugged, gave a sad smile.

She stared at me as though I were slowly crushing a kitten’s skull in my fist.

I broke into a trot, eyes fixed on the car park, ducked so low the long grass tickled the undersides of my arms. Sprinting, I could hit the trees in seconds, but I didn’t want any fast movement to draw their attention.

Behind me, the girl yelped.

The sound hit me like a slap. I spun, still treading backwards. She was on the ground, rubbing her ankle.

“I slipped,” she moaned. “It *hurts.*”

I didn't know what to do. I couldn't just leave her... *could I?* Of all the shitty things I'd done to stay alive, leaving this girl to the Blades would probably top the lot. But if she was trouble before, then she was doubly so injured, and what good would it do for us *both* to get caught?

I glanced at the car park. One of the men was beckoning someone over, his finger going to his ear.

The girl tried to get up, but pain rucked her mouth when she put pressure on her foot, and she dropped back. She covered her eyes with her arm. Her mound of ginger curls shook as she sobbed.

The moment was stretching too long. Any second one of the goons was going to look our way.

Do something!

What angels there are on this Earth, I am not among them — but really, what else could I do?

Staying low, I hurried back. I crouched and hissed for her to climb on my back. She struggled on, wrapping her arms around my neck. At least she didn't weigh me down too much. Well, not literally.

I set off. Faster than before. They'd heard her cry out, I was sure of it. Until we hit the forest, we were in the open. The thick grass grabbed at the hems of my flared joggers. My legs hadn't recovered from crawling through the vents, and my muscles quickly burned. I just made it to the first trees, weaving between them, jumping roots, skidding leaves, before I heard a whistle — loud, the kind with fingers — then a bellow of *seen them!* — the girl gasped, clung tighter to me — and turning my head, I glimpsed the edge of the car park, just in time to see thirty, maybe forty, maybe more of the men starting after us.