

HYPODERMIA

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A Thesis

in

The Department

of

English

Presented in Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements

for the Degree of Master of Arts (English) at

Concordia University

Montreal, Quebec, Canada

August 2021

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CONCORDIA UNIVERSITY
School of Graduate Studies

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Entitled: Hypodermia

and submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Masters of Arts (English)

complies with the regulations of the University and meets the accepted standards with respect to originality and quality.

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ABSTRACT

Hypodermia

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Hypodermia is a novel about the ‘skin trade’ relayed through a cyberpunk and magic realist lens. It follows the trajectory of Investigation Officer Mehmet Akhavan who works for England’s National Crime Agency at the Port of Dover and unwittingly uncovers a conspiracy wherein snakeheads are selling the skins of refugees to underground illicit galleries and fashion shows. This is a dark, speculative tragi-comedy which, at its heart, acts as a political commentary on the United Kingdom’s treatment of migrants and, more globally, dives under the skin of modern slavery, drug trafficking and transplant tourism and the systematic exploitation that binds them along the same smuggling routes. The paths of a variety show host-turned-influencer, a televangelist legislator, a forensic scientist, a Syrian literature student and a deluded anatomy professor collide and coalesce in this alternate future that attempts to dissect the ways in which humans commodify and fetishize each other’s bodies. Mehmet’s pursuit of the truth will lead him to confront the weird, beautiful and horrific corners of a world set on turning its citizens into objects of art.

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Prologue: Crossing

Mehmet tipped his head back and sucked at the sky.

Salt lined his throat and cloaked his tongue.

All he could do in the press of bodies was gulp sea spray, but never oxygen, never enough oxygen.

Every sound and texture was heightened to razorblade precision. His senses screamed in overdrive as the engine curdled the waves behind them, driving them up the flank of a wave, into a limbo of foam and circling gulls, before slamming them remorselessly back against the surface of the water until Mehmet feared the motor would tear itself free from the rubber boat.

He felt fingers circle his wrist, but in the crush, couldn't turn back to see who it was.

Sweat and salt gummed skin to shirt and shirt to anorak, or whatever plastic bag or tarpaulin the passengers had managed to wrap around themselves. They were all soaked through regardless, legs cramped from being unable to stretch for the last two hours and bruised all over as they were thrown upon each other's bodies with every aimless descent and ascent.

Skulls slammed into noses, sodden hair stung eyeballs. They were all bleeding from each other's jewellery: it was known that the only way to make this crossing was to convert everything you owned and had saved into silver and gold. You never knew when you might need to trade something fast for a ticket out and metal was a universal currency.

Mehmet, like all the other souls on the dingy, was a practiced nomad and carried every lira he'd earned, begged for and stolen in the form of two chains about his neck, a knock-off Rolex on his wrist and an assortment of rings on his fingers.

His exposed skin was lacerated from everyone else's keepsakes, even as his own trinkets unintentionally parted the flesh of others — the links of his necklaces chaffing his nape raw until it smarted with salt water — in the pendulum swing of staggering and grasping limbs.

Back on the Turkish mainland, the head smuggler had pushed them into the water, kicked the engine into life then splashed back up to his 4x4 before tearing away up the beach. The snakehead hadn't wanted to risk his own life getting them across the sea and now they all took turns battling with the rudder and doing their best to navigate the craft against the glare of the scorching sun. In the back of Mehmet's mind lurked the thought: if the snakehead wasn't willing to chance the crossing, what odds did any of *them* have of making it?

Suddenly, there were cries of "Boat! Boat!" and the hand around Mehmet's wrist tightened its grip. He felt water run down his cheeks, which he told himself was nothing by spray.

Mehmet was shorter than most, and in the midst of flapping plastic, flung arms and gasping mouths, he had to rely on the messages passed back along the boat to know what was happening.

The cry of "Boat!" was replaced with "They're close!" and a shiver of panic rippled throughout everyone. "What flag?" some shouted, "What flag?" and then the boy, Selcuk, at the prow of the vessel, who had been yelling directions back along the boat throughout the voyage, shouted back "No flag!".

Someone threw up down Mehmet's back and the air filled with the yeasty smell of the stale Afghan bread the smugglers had chucked into the boat after them.

In the ensuing panic, as some wailed and others offered choked prayers to Allah, HaShem, El Elyon and Ahura Mazda, Mehmet murmured his own Salaah, weighing his options as he recited the well-trodden prayer. No flag meant that it was neither coastguards, nor a Border Force patrol. That left them with either more snakeheads, or the other option, which Mehmet's brain wrestled with and suppressed.

"Allaahu Akbar, Allaahu Akbar," he said. The habitual words mingled with the refrain of "No flag, no flag, no flag" and circled above them like gulls, adding to the roaring and clicking of the engine and the desperate pleas for salvation, sanctification and mercy. Was it too late to affirm his faith now? What had being righteous brought him so far? Mehmet felt hot shame in his moment of doubt, feeling that to invoke Allah when it was convenient was like summoning a Genii from a bottle to ask it a favour — gods didn't dole out miracles like party favours.

Nevertheless, he found himself inciting two duas from the Quran used to secure safe passage, the words of the holy text a well-mapped road on his tongue's muscle memory:

"I depart with Allah's name, relying on Him. It is Allah who saves us from sins with His guidance."

And, lifting his head to the sky with another gasping breath, he continued:

"O Allah, I seek refuge in You from misleading or being misled or oppressing or being oppressed or from being ignorant or bearing the result of ignorance."

He thought about dying like this: caught somewhere between a non-believer and a devoted follower. The flux lit a fire within him and suddenly, he was filled with rage: rage at the fragility of his own body; at the situation they had all put themselves in; at their foul and wretched helplessness.

Mehmet clenched his teeth until he thought one of them would split — cracked and crowded like a collapsed picket fence as they were — and steeled himself against his instinct to fight through the crowd, leap overboard and take his chances swimming the rest of the way.

Sucking again for oxygen, Mehmet's lungs found only gasoline fumes and moisture. He stayed put; at any rate, the riptides would have their way with him if he jumped. To swim was to become food for the fish, rays and sharks.

The sun had beat a migraine into him and now every sensation — every new movement, every shard of blue sky glimpsed above him, every fresh sound of the new-born crying at the back and the screech of someone's glasses being crushed beneath collective boots — felt as if it would rent his skull in two.

Someone let off a flare. Mehmet felt the heat of it as it fizzed then screamed up into the air from between their bodies, staining the sky fuchsia.

He had scarcely more than a second to realise that the ensuing smell of charred meat was his own flesh burning, before the skin pirates were upon them.

The snakehead's smile cracked his face like a fissure in scorched mud. Each of his teeth seemed to have been pulled from a litany of objects and creatures. Canines had been pushed into his gums in place of incisors in the top row, scattered amidst what looked like memory chips and smelted pieces of ship. Shark teeth jutted from his bottom row between gold and platinum capped nubs that might once have been pre-molars. Some looked like they'd been extracted from dentures, such was their lurid whiteness, whilst others had been aged yellow by smoke and drink.

His beer gut lapped over his belt, partially shrouding the gun he'd jammed into his khaki shorts.

As the pirate strode along the deck of the motorboat towering above their rubber dingy, Mehmet caught further glimpses of the gun, obscured as it was between the pirate's hairy flab and sun-bleached Hawaiian shirt. The weapon looked to be a crude prototype of Flesh-Tech, a touch-sensitive petri-dish grown slab of derma enveloping the guard where a trigger would have been. Through a carefully programmed sequence of commands, manifested as finger-prods, the skin grip could be taken on and off safety, or set to fire either single shots or rapid-fire rounds.

As if reading Mehmet's thoughts, the snakehead traced the flank of the gun's derma-grip with his thumb, running a dirty nail over the baby-pink flesh, which squirmed under his touch.

The flare hung in the sky, some ten metres to their left, obscuring the sun and spewing pink smoke that trickled down to them in reams, encircling them until they had no choice but to draw pink air into their lungs along with the motor fumes. They were drifting even further still from the spot from which they'd initially fired it, dragged in tandem with the pirate vessel to whose starboard the smuggler's harpoon had pinned them.

The snakehead barked at them in broken English, stabbing the rose sky with the remaining three digits of his right hand.

“Long way you swim. Police not come now. If yes, they you turn around. Allow I propose you a trade.”

His salad of teeth mashed the last syllable in two as he shifted his novelty *I ❤️ Rhodes* flat cap, revealing a border of pearly white flesh along the top half of his forehead where the beaten leather of his sun-burned skin ended.

“Need we some repairs to bodies. Me and crew must new parts have. Perhaps we repatch boat if your get necessities. Missing parts fingers two be, ear one, kidney one, eyes one, skin piece of. Please five donors. Exchange is fair. We fix, you live. Deal?”

Mehmet felt the grafted square of Selin’s skin itch in his right palm. He hadn’t been the only one back in Bodrum to surgically swap parts with a lover. It was becoming increasingly common to patch with a dear one’s skin in order to approximate a kinetic channel of communication, after all, but at least when *they’d* had it done, the black-market surgeon had given him general anaesthetic.

This time, something told Mehmet there would be no relief from the pain of an illicit transplant.

The purple scar tissue that bordered his graft screamed a siren of pure white that shot down his central nervous system. The bootleg Immuno-Xcept drugs he’d traded his first ring for on Samos were wearing off. He was running an increased risk that his body might reject his lover’s skin with every minute that passed.

Their boat was taking on water. If he and the other refugees continued to slide back towards the motor, the imbalance would soon tip them all out. And if not, they likely had some fifteen minutes before the craft sank anyway.

Mehmet's trainers, sodden with salt water and the piss of panicking passengers, fought for purchase on the slick tarp surface of the rubber boat as they all slid and flailed, clutching each other's arms and shoulders and necks and kicking one another for room. Someone's ring opened Mehmet's cheek and within seconds the wound was burning from the salt spray.

No one was volunteering.

The snakehead's lips were pressed into a tight, blistered line as he drew the flesh pistol, waving it about before training its cobalt muzzle over each of their faces and stroking its flesh.

"Can do I something convince further you?" he asked, screwing up the craters of his eyes against the sun's glare.

When his words were met with silence, he fired the gun into the crush.

Someone's ear disappeared in a puff of blood.

The water-logged vessel nearly toppled as Alexandria, the injured woman, careened in her blood-blinded terror.

Mehmet's transplant struggled to free itself from his hand. The fresh agony leant him clarity; he raised his arm, lifting himself up on the bodies of others so that the snakehead could see him.

"Most good, boy," the pirate purred, "help you me. Only four volunteers now more, then safe passage all for, yes?"

The pirates dragged Mehmet up the gunwhale. They were a colourful patchwork of cobbled together clothing, zigzagging limbs and skin grafts stitched together in a mis-match of body tones.

As a pirate with a prosthetic nose removed Mehmet's ring and pinkie fingers with a laser scalpel, Mehmet trained his eyes on the impossibly blue Mediterranean. He followed it up to the indeterminate zone between sea and sky, trying to locate a clear point of transition between one and the other, though finding none. One of his rings fell off the stump of his pinkie and the pirate with the prosthetic nose — with avuncular tenderness — slid it onto Mehmet's other, undamaged hand.

Drifting in and out of consciousness, his head lolled back and dangled over the side of the boat so that the world flipped. The sea became the sky and the sky the sea. Vaguely aware of the pirates sealing his amputated appendages to the hand of the lead snakehead with Derma-Tape, Mehmet searched again between the gulls that circled like sharks below him and the waves that rolled above like clouds for the line that distinguished one from the other.

As he bled overboard, he found he still couldn't spy the connective tissue between the two worlds. Everything was the same shade of violent blue.

Freed from the mass of bodies in the rubber boat below, Mehmet found that, at last, he could breathe.

Everything swam together and Mehmet let the patch of Selin's skin in his non-mutilated hand carry him back in time to the internet café in Istanbul where they first met.

The last thing Mehmet recalled seeing before he blacked out, was the snakehead bending over him, waving a hand in his face. A hand made whole with Mehmet's stolen fingers.

Chapter 1: Thi

Part of her was missing.

Mehmet suspected she'd passed at least a handful of months in The Jungle — a refugee camp on the outskirts of Calais — before being flayed and shipped across The Channel in the belly of the freight ferry *The Pride of Burgundy*.

Rather than sewing her up after the operation, whoever had done this to her had spread derma-plast over the exposed muscle underlayer — a crude patch-up job that severely protracted the healing process. The plast had left her incapable of turning her back, or moving her arms, without it causing her slight frame to spasm.

The girl's first name was Thi. This remained, to date, the only personal detail about her they had managed to extract.

She had one eye slightly larger and a degree higher than the other, which gave her a look of being perpetually, quizzically amused, though the worry-lines that mapped the corners of her mouth and chartered her forehead told a different story. Her black fringe swept from the cowlick on the right side of her hairline down the left of her face with the flourish of a stage curtain being swept back.

Selin had had a cowlick like that. Selin had also had strands of hair that fell in a slight, inward-turned curve either side of her face, caressing her high, wide cheekbones, just as Thi's did now. Like Thi, Selin tied the rest of her hair back in a loose, artfully messy bun, though hers had been coarser, a cascade of curls in the salty Mediterranean air, as easy to comb as a briar patch.

Mehmet shook himself and tried to set straight the details of the case before them.

The National Crime Agency couldn't date when Thi had begun her journey from Vietnam, nor place her arrival in the sprawling migrant tent-city. Nor could it do much by way of pinpointing her whereabouts throughout her stay there.

The Jungle ate you up.

You could find yourself stuck there for months, years even. Either you got out by finding a contact who'd FedEx you a fake passport (cash up-front was required) then flying into England from Copenhagen or Amsterdam where airport security was a little more lax — shredding all forms of identification and flushing them down the airplane toilet mid-air before arriving at Stanstead, Heathrow or Gatwick Customs; without documentation, the authorities had no choice but to let you claim asylum. Or, you took your chances with the Irish and Albanian gangs who ran the truck routes and demanded an altogether different type of payment.

Thi, it seemed — out of desperation and a lack of money, having had nothing but the clothes on her back when they found her — had opted for the latter.

In the antiseptic light of the interrogation room, the Vietnamese translator was doing her best to piece together Thi's fractured account for Kit and Mehmet.

Thi was the second, skinned individual to attempt the border in the last month. Some ten days prior, Mehmet had detained a Czech man missing a portion of skin on his right thigh. The cut had been hastily done, but the ratio seemed tailored — made to measure — a 4" by 2.5" rectangle that curled round his leg below the groin. A crimson postcard.

The piece they'd taken from Thi had been more substantial.

“Can you tell me about your experience in the shipping container, as a ‘box person’, as you called it?” Mehmet asked her now, doing his best to keep the revulsion and anger at what had been done to her out of his voice.

The translator passed on the question, but Thi neither registered that she’d heard it, nor allowed a sound to pass her pressed, white-edged lips.

“You were each wrapped in foil blankets, there was no ventilation, you were partially crushed beneath pallets of food. It was the traffickers who did that to you, not us. We took you out of that truck, we’re the people who want to keep you safe.”

Nothing.

Mehmet’s colleague, Kit, another Level 5 Investigation Officer in his NCA unit, chipped in: “The snakeheads treated yer like produce, like exported goods. I’m sure they told yer if yer spoke to us, that yer’d be deported. That’s right, ain’t it?”

Kit’s Norfolk twang was causing the translator some grief.

“Well, that’s not how we do things ’ere. No one’s going to put yer in a detention centre or send yer back to France. We’re goin’ to do the best we can for yer’ ere,” Kit said in attempt to reassure her. The assemblage of piercings which wove about the helix of Kit’s ears and punctuated her tragus and conch, tinkled merrily.

Nothing.

Whatever Thi had been through, she had surely been given every opportunity to distrust and fear figures of authority. Renegotiating trust in a situation like this was going to take more time than they had, but somehow Mehmet was going to have to circumnavigate the problem

before Thi was processed by the system. Something had to give. They were going to have to find a way past her defences and the language barrier if they were to get the testimony they needed to jail the detained smugglers — who were claiming ignorance of the contents of the container in which they'd been transferring Thi and the others from ship to truck-bed in when they were apprehended. Right now, Thi couldn't differentiate between the men who had drilled a single hole into the container, causing her and the other stowaways to slowly suffocate, and the officers who were trying to convict those same men.

Selin had had a similar distrust of uniformed men like Mehmet when they'd first.

Back then, Mehmet had been in his late teens and was enjoying his two weeks' leave after having spent his first year serving in the Turkish Merchant Navy at sea. When they'd met, he'd been moored at last, determined to do a little as possible in Istanbul: to avoid at all costs the tourist-y day stuff and hedonistic night stuff the other sailors were likely embroiled in, for as long as he possibly could. He'd been sat in an internet café, owned by Selin's uncle, playing *Skin Walker: Rise of the Flensers* on a GameCube hooked up to a greasy monitor. Thus far, Mehmet had been working through each of the game's twelve campaigns, collecting the scalps of vanquished sorcerers and the pelts of butchered monsters to increase his XP, hit points and health bar.

Flakes of filo pastry from the café owner's Borek, which Mehmet had grown fond of devouring in hourly intervals, were dusted all over the trousers of his uniform when Selin first saw him. It had been so long since he'd worn civilian clothes, Mehmet had opted to continue wearing his naval force get-up rather than trying to integrate. However, the discipline instilled in him from the drills on the ship meant that he still took his one set of clothes to the laundromat at

19:00 every evening and then rose at 05:00 every morning to steam them in the trouser press built into the wall of his tiny hotel room.

The internet café's décor was sparse save for a drinks machine with its light broken and a sun-bleached Iron Maiden poster of the *Brave New World* album—Eddie's skull face breaking through the clouds over a futuristic London—tacked to the plasterboard wall. One of the corners had come unstuck and was curling in on itself. Beneath the bolts of lightning shooting from Eddie's empty eye sockets, were a miscellany of old and new consoles, screens, keyboards, mice, controllers, joysticks and speaker systems, criss-crossed with snarl of cables of every colour and length and jacked into each available outlet, extension and adapter.

Hunched amongst this eclectic medley of machinery was a collection of young technophiles in an assortment of stained T-shirts, hoodies, joggers and stone-washed jeans. Inert save for the twitching of their fingers and thumbs, in unison, they leaned so far into their screens they all but disappeared into the glowing rectangles.

Body mods were frowned upon, but not outlawed, in Turkey and many of those who frequented the café had had patches of wild cat, grey wolf, monk seal, dolphin, Loggerhead sea turtle, striped hyena, brown bear and Anatolian leopard fused into segments of their exposed necks and shoulders. Some even had the feathers of black vultures and Northern bald Ibis implanted in the skin behind their ears, or transplanted in ridges across the tops of their heads, like absurdly preened punks, or sprouting from their collarbones and the backs of their hands.

Skin Walker had been developed by the games company 'Allocorium' who — in addition to pioneering other, more modern mainstream games for Xbox 360 like *Flesh Phantom* and *Cyb-Organ* — sold mega fans the right to have pieces of endangered animals surgically configured

into their bodies so they could more closely resemble the bio-modified avatars they'd tailored for their virtual worlds.

So, there Mehmet had been, surrounded by augmented cyber-punks who seemed allergic to deodorant, in his immaculate suit adorned with ribbons, stitched insignia and pastry crumbs when Selin swept into the shop dressed in a hijab, black knife-pleat silk dress and Led Zeppelin t-shirt and said:

“Shouldn't you be busy shooting Kurdish peasants right now?”

After he'd gotten over his initial shock, Mehmet had managed to stutter, “I'm in the Merchant *Navy* ... we deal in shipments of car parts and textiles ...”

Somehow this had impressed her even less than if he'd been massacring Turkey's political enemies on the regular and she'd shot him a disgusted look before going to help her uncle fix a fried games console pluming smoke.

The following day Mehmet, without crumbs on his suit this time, sat in his regular spot. He'd made it to the Tower of the Flensers with the scalps of all ten disciples and was finally duelling the necromancer, dying and respawning every five minutes, when Selin passed him, laid her long, perfectly painted nails on the back of his swivel chair and said:

“Try shooting the tattoo of the Ankh.”

Then she sashayed to the front of the store and promptly fell into conversation with her uncle.

Mehmet's avatar drew his crossbow and shot a bolt into the heart of the Ankh on the necromancer's chest.

The high sorcerer erupted in flames.

After a few more days of such exchanges, Selin emerged from the grubby kitchenette behind her uncle's front desk, passing through the bead curtain like it was water, and set a hot chocolate down on Mehmet's mouse mat.

“Shit, forgot the garnish!”

She returned with a pack of tiny pink and white marshmallows, sprinkled a dozen over the quiff of whipped cream that topped the cocoa and sat down to mock Mehmet's gameplay in earnest. Nursing both his wounded pride and the hot chocolate, he set about committing to memory the exact formation of moles on Selin's neck, etching in his synapses the way she looked when she tipped her head back and flashed her teeth mid-laugh.

Mehmet recalled that she'd made a bad joke, though right now, half-present in the Dover interrogation room of the NCA complexes, he couldn't recall what it had been about. He could remember, however, what Selin said next:

“Kidding!” she'd said in Turkish. “Sorry, my sense of humour carries better in other languages.”

“What languages are you funny in?”

“Kurdish and Armenian, though my first tongue is Arabic.”

She'd told him how, when not visiting her family in Istanbul for mid-term break, she was studying in Damascus where her undergraduate thesis was on the theme of political insurgency in Kurdish oral poetry. She told Mehmet how happy she was in Syria. All this, of course, was before Assad's regime sprayed her father with insecticide in a torture cell and set him on fire.

Then Selin had said, “I find the best way to understand your first language is to learn another. Turkish, you see, has helped me cast my mother tongue in a whole new light.”

Back in the present, Mehmet shook away the reverie like a bad dream. Being forced to learn English, for him, had only led him further away from his birth language.

Beside him, Kit was saying:

“The truck driver is facing charges, so is the owner of the haulage company that took yer across The Channel. I don’t know what else they told yer, although I can guess, but they can’t reach yer ’ere. Yer safe ’ere with us. They promised yer work? Yer parents in debt for sending yer ’ere and yer need to pay ’em back. Money? Is it money that’s keeping yer from talking? Because the “gardening” job they promised yer might pay, but it’s a cannabis farm and yer would have been stuck there, forced to—”

“Ngừng thở.”

“She can’t breathe,” the translator said.

The ‘CO2 Route’, a 6,000 mile trek across Asia into Western Europe, was so named for the way it slowly squeezed the oxygen out of your body a little at a time, like the dregs being rolled to the end of a tube of toothpaste, until you were spent. Only a precious few made it.

They suspected the girl before them had been flown to Beijing in order to obtain forged travel documents before being transited in long-haul trucks in abhorrent conditions across Russia, through Ukraine to the Belgian port of Zeebrugge and finally into France.

After undergoing illegal graft extraction, Thi had been trafficked by Albanian gangs from Calais to Dover in a container along with sixteen others who, mercifully, had all made it. If an

individual were to survive the oxygen deprivation, savage temperatures, days starving and stranded at each checkpoint, then the web of money laundering, drug smuggling and modern slavery in which they'd find themselves— if they were “lucky” enough to make it to England— would keep them so unmoored from their family, origins, language and dreams that they'd suffocate from hopelessness.

Thi's breathing was ragged: half-relief found in fits and starts of cramped lungs.

They paused the interview.

When they resumed, Thi was breathing more steadily.

She took small sips of water from the clear plastic cup Mehmet had filled for her from the water cooler in the corridor.

This time around, she seemed willing to talk.

“Họ đưa tôi đến một trang trại.”

“They took her to a farm,” said the translator.

“She couldn't see. She says they tied something over her eyes and told her she was there to help save the life of another woman who had ... some sort of illness of the skin, she says ... a cancer, perhaps.”

“What did she notice about the farm?” asked Kit, her Formica chair creaking as she leaned forward.

“She says sheep. There were sheep. She says they took her through a barn, where they parked their van and she couldn’t see, but she smelt straw and the mess of the animals. She said she stood in some of their excrement and it was wet and smelled strong and fresh, but she couldn’t hear the sheep, so they must have been moved someplace else.

“And then they took ’er to the farmhou—,” Kit began.

“Sorry, sorry,” the translator interjected, adjusting the collar of her grey turtleneck and smoothing out her chequered trousers, “she says there was something else, a stronger smell. Chemical, she says. Has no idea what it was, but says it stuck to her.”

“Stuck to her?” Mehmet swirled the remains of cold coffee in the bottom of his cup, then knocked it back.

“Stuck to her skin, her clothes. She says the chemicals were in her clothes and on her skin for weeks and for a while afterwards she could even taste ... she says *ghosts* of the smell in her mouth. She says she thought the smell was never going to leave her.”

“But she ’as no idea what it was, or what it reminded ’er of?” said Kit.

“No. Wait, she says yes. She says it reminded her of fruit, of berries.”

“Does she know which type of berries?” Mehmet implored. “It’s important. Please.”

The translator furrowed her brow.

“Raspberries, she says. Beneath the chemicals, there was the smell of raspberries.”

“Thank you.” Mehmet’s heart sank.

The latest chemical preserver in skin trafficking was a noxious, modern type of embalming fluid named Formalde-HIDE, a clear liquid instantly recognisable for its haunting undertones of raspberry. The stuff was used in the barbaric process of one thing and one thing only: the taxidermizing and prolongation of life of human tissue for the purposes of illicit transplantation.

“Is there anythin’ else she remembers from ’er journey there?” Kit leaned back in what she must have thought was a non-threatening pose.

“She says it was bumpy. Many turns, many turns, so she lost track, but she heard birds through the window, when they opened it. Seabirds.”

“And the house, ask her about the house,” Mehmet pressed. “Did they ever take her blindfold off at any point?”

Thi’s baby hairs were pasted to her temples, her skin damp — despite the aggressive air-conditioning — and waxy beneath the strip lighting that segued across the suspended polystyrene ceiling panels.

“She says they did. She says they laid her out on the table in the kitchen of the farmhouse, but they closed the door, so that was all she could see. And they gave her drugs to put her to sleep and they were wearing masks, visors, goggles, latex gloves and paper robes ... gowns ... like doctors, but not quite ...”

“What did they look like? How many of them were there?”

Mehmet combed his beard with the remaining fingers of his right hand to soothe himself.

“She says she doesn’t know.”

“What tools did they use? What equipment did they ’ave, does she know *that*?”

“She doesn’t. No, she’s not sure. All that she saw was this sort of pen ... a metal pen with a strangle handle like a fishing rod.”

“A knife? Was it a scalpel she saw?”

“She doesn’t know. She says it made a sound and when she woke up, their gloves were covered in different colours. She says they had to take her out in a chair on wheels because she couldn’t stand with the gel ... the plastic they put on her back in place of the skin ...”

Mehmet felt his insides churn, as if the three coffees he’d already downed were burning their way steadily through his stomach lining.

Thi’s hair, so black it seemed indigo beneath the strip lights, had slipped out of her bun and hung, wet with perspiration down the back of her neck. A stray lock of it had waterfalled over her cheek. Her collarbone gleamed. Drops of sweat pooled in her clavicle before running down and disappearing beneath her cotton gown to collect, Mehmet imagined, between her breasts. He made an effort to raise his eyes and study her face: her face and her mouth and the words leaving it.

“Can yer ask ’er if she would like some more water? Does she need a break? If she’s feeling upset again, we can take a second pause?” asked Kit, her taser and hinged handcuffs clanking against the underside of the faux-cedar laminate table.

Thi didn’t answer.

Mehmet caught himself speculating about Thi's age — he figured she could be anywhere between her late teens and mid-twenties — and hated himself for wondering, for thinking about her age and her body.

Kit asked the translator to repeat the question, but no dice from Thi.

They were about to pause the interview again, when Thi spoke, her lips fluttering like moth wings as the words tumbled out of her.

The translator, for the first time since proceedings began, didn't convey the Vietnamese into English in tandem with Thi's story, but instead listened quietly, intently, both palms facing downwards on the table and stared at her unblinking until she was done.

“She says ... she says that afterwards, when they were done and taking her back to the car, they pushed the chair over a rug or something and she fell. She says when they lifted her back into it, her blindfold slipped and she saw the other woman.

“She says the woman was lying naked, on a different table in the living room and that they were undressing her. They were cutting her out of her clothes ... and she ... and she had a painting on her back.”

“A painting?”

“Yes, she says there was a painting on this woman's back and they were going to cut it out. She says that their gloves were stained the same colours as the painting and they had another of those pens with the funny handle and knives this time and she says the painting ... the painting was of a man ... or a monster, she said. A strange thing with a black beard, horns and long ears and a mouth that was all red.”

The interviewer's hands left sweat-misted imprints on the table when she was done. This was scratching at her arms, her gaze angled onto her lap.

She was not the first individual this had happened to, and she would not be the last. Mehmet refused to become acclimatised to these sorts of stories. If he grew apathetic, then he would accept such violations of refugee bodies as routine. It was his job to tackle the exploitation of migrants, to expose the trafficking that went undetected in this country: to shine a light on the violence done in the shadows. He always told himself he'd prevent the next one of these incidents, halt it in its tracks, because one day it could be someone he knew sat in that chair. One day, he could be looking across the interrogation table at Selin.

"Let's take another thirty," said Mehmet, tripping over the words. Fumbling with his empty cup, he flung the interview room door open before they could see the tears fall.

Chapter 2: Balloons

On-screen, the legislator's mouth was moving at unnatural speed.

“They're just left there, folks. In the gutters, in the roads, on park benches, under bridges. In cesspools, in the filth. It's undignified, it's barbaric. They're just left there to waste away. Worm food. Makes me feel sick, folks, it really does.”

Five minutes prior, Rob (the Grade 3 officer who ran Mehmet's unit) had marched into the breakroom and come to an abrupt halt beside the sofa upon which Mehmet was slouched. Without looking down at him, Rob had said, “You don't mind, do you.” — a statement not a question — and proceeded to switch the channel from Sky Sports to Fox News.

Rob was one of those people who overly played into his role. His lavish use of acronyms spoke to his having watched too many true-crime shows and was inversely proportional to his competency. The Level 3 spent more time trying to play a part than he did doing his actual job.

A typical sentence from Rob might go along the lines of:

“They'll RIC the perp before tomorrow, bet you anything he's part of that OCG you've been trying to crack now, so we can file for an EIO.”

Mehmet and Rob had been colleagues way back when they'd worked at Heathrow Airport as Customs, rather than Investigation, Officers. Rob had still been his superior back then and Mehmet recalled a time when his boss had gestured from the snaking queue of disembarked passengers at Arrivals to the ranks of Customs Officers, most of whom were first or second generations immigrants, and said: “From the looks of you lot, people arriving would think they were still abroad.”

It had taken some time for Mehmet to wash that comment off his skin.

The worst part was that he doubted Rob had any memory of ever saying it.

Now he stood at Mehmet's shoulder, "mhhhhmmm-ing" at intervals, his bald head polished until it resembled clear shellac. Though shaved within a millimetre of its life, Mehmet could still make out the dashes of ginger in Rob's otherwise white head and facial hair. As always, Rob had cinched his suit trousers impossibly high about his midriff, so that his butt — already uncomfortably close to Mehmet's face — was accentuated by the seam in the steel-grey cotton-blend fabric.

Before them, on the plasma wall-screen, spittle flying from his mouth, was Jean Gibson, his peroxide blonde mop of hair flailing as if some sort of arctic animal were gripping hold of his scalp for dear life.

Mehmet had seen men like him before, had *met* men like him before. The fools were always bad news. Jean reminded him of the UK Independence Party and English Defence League spokespeople: the clown mascots they adopted who spewed bigoted rhetoric too wild to ever be believed, too wild to ever get traction or draw a media buzz, until suddenly they had millions of followers and a huge platform and thousands of votes. Fanatics who should be televangelists but had somehow ended up as politicians. They seemed mad and harmless and stupid, until suddenly, they weren't. The mad ones were always the ones to watch.

"And who am I talking about, you might be asking yourselves," Jean continued. "Which demographic might I be talking about here? The people I am talking about are some of the most disenfranchised, overlooked and shunned group of individuals on the planet ..."

Here, the legislator gestured spasmodically, as if undergoing an exorcism.

“I am talking, of course, about drug addicts and the homeless.”

“Mhhhhmmm,” said Rob, lost in thought as he twisted his wedding ring above an inflamed joint. Mehmet did his best to make it appear as if he wasn’t slowly inching his face away from Rob’s butt.

“Now folks, I’m not going to get into the nitty-gritty of why they end up in those situations. We can all agree that life has dealt them each a bad turn: a bad, bad hand indeed. But I will say that although there are all kinds of shelters and needle exchanges and food banks and fantastic, fantastic initiatives to rehabilitate them, those only help and serve this demographic whilst they’re still *alive*.

“And the question, the question I want to pose to you is: how can we help them after they die?”

“Now hear me out. Let me give you an example. Let me present you with some statistics: over 68% of the bodies of addicts and drifters will never receive a proper, God-honest burial and a staggering total 93% of them aren’t even awarded the dignity of a funeral to take them into the halls of the Lord of Peace. I’m talking, of course folks, about our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.”

“And what about the non-Christian homeless?” asked Mehmet out loud, before he could stop himself.

Rob shot him daggers.

To avoid further confrontation with his boss, Mehmet surreptitiously dropped the brightness on his phone as low as it would go and, angling it away from Rob, typed Jean’s name

into the search bar. He clicked on the third return, an article in *The Independent* about a crackpot provocateur running for Congress.

According to the article, Gibson was a State Legislator in Missouri and had developed quite a following for his magnetic, vicious telecaster persona. He had his own privately funded TV channel remotely linked to a dozen different social media platforms which live-streamed in tandem, flooding all available outlets with ideas about legalising flesh-tech, recycling the dead in the name of Jesus and all kinds of art-patching modifications. All of the above were outlawed in the majority of U.S. states and were heavily moderated in Europe, employed only in hospitals to treat rare injuries and critical cases of body dysmorphia, so the article claimed.

In the background, Gibson's voice, at moments shrill, at others guttural, punched out the beat of each new syllable with an accumulated sense of urgency.

The journalist went on to address rumours that Gibson's platforms were backed by VIVI-CELL, a cosmetics line who were being lobbied against for the suspect nature and unethical sourcing of their "Fashion Flesh" products, which sold worryingly realistic, but supposed faux-human, skin accessories and clothing materials to top designers like Prada, Givenchy, Gucci, Lustrine and McQueen.

In his peripheral, Mehmet saw Rob wave at him. When he pretended not to see it, continuing to scroll further down the article, Rob snapped his fingers.

"Listen to this, Mehmet, it's important."

Gibson yammered on, his voice filling Mehmet with an inexorable dread that put him in mind of the sonorous judgement of organ music.

“When these people pass, they are — and this is a medical classification here folks — known as “unclaimed bodies”. They will fester and be forgotten and never once see the redemptive light of heaven, or whatever other place your faith tells you is supposedly there, unless their bodies are given a purpose. The purpose of helping the glorious brotherhood and sisterhood of humanity to survive and rejoice.

“I’m talking, of course folks, about ‘Anatomical Gifts’.”

Mehmet ran an anxious hand over his beard.

“Yes, folks, that’s right, I’m talking about ensuring that their bodies are never wasted, that they instead serve our Lord and his blessed, redemptive light by being employed for the purposes of transplantation, therapy, education and lab study. Let their deaths not be in vain, oh Lord, let them serve us through science, by furthering medical advancements and culture such as the prevention of disease through dissection research, the reduced waiting periods in queues for donor registries, and in the form of art. Next week, folks, I will be touring Europe — with my first talk starting in London — to more directly tackle this important change in legislation the world over. England, it seems, has already shown willing to amend their ways and—.”

“Did he just say art?” Mehmet asked, immediately regretting his decision to speak.

Rob uncrossed his arms.

In the background, Jean’s bizarrely small hands, like two shaved rodents, disappeared and re-appeared from his sleeves as he spoke.

And in that moment, Mehmet felt a shiver of recognition at an unspeakable grotesqueness shared by the man on screen and the man beside him.

Jacking his thumb at the TV which crackled with static, Rob said, “The guy makes some good points.”

Gibson’s neck pivoted in his aggressively pressed suit like a malfunctioning automaton as he stabbed with his finger over and over at the camera lens.

“He’s trying to implement that Anatomical Gift Act at federal level, unifying all those U.S. state acts — bit of a mess but the British government could learn a thing or two from him now we’re finally free from the clutches of the European Union.

“Did you know you can buy a human football off of eBay,” Rob continued. “It’s about time this shit was regulated with Derma-Banks and Aug-M-ex clinics. Personally, I’ve always admired the American sense of pragmatism; whilst us anxiety-riddled Brits wring our hands and bury ourselves in bureaucracy, the Americans find solutions. Men like Jean don’t want praise for any of this: they just see a problem and they fix it. Americans get on with things and don’t look back. Admirable, don’t you think?”

“Not sure I do, sir. I’m not sure the donations were all that voluntary, sir, or that Gibson’s for-profit collection scheme ads, where they basically harvest organs from care homes, are all that legal, either.”

“I’m disappointed, Mehmet, I would have thought coming from the Islamic Wild West of Turkey, you’d be fully in favour of the kinds of liberation of the body Gibson’s advocating for.”

Mehmet’s mind emptied itself of all possible retorts. He felt the coffee eating into his stomach lining once more and wiped his palms down his navy service trousers. In that moment, he felt capable of hurting Rob, of really hurting him. Little more than a second separated him from an act of unspeakable violence.

“OK champ, round two on the interview, let’s go.”

“Her nerves are frayed,” replied Mehmet, muting Gibson.

“Sounds like someone just wants a longer break,” said Rob with a dry chuckle. “You should probably lay off those, too. They’re terrible for your health, ” he added, gesturing to the empty, crumpled packets of Cheese & Onion crisps Mehmet had retrieved from the vending machine and scoffed earlier — it had been a two packets kind of afternoon.

Gibson being muted leant an even eerier air to his frenzied sermon, his violent gesticulations and gnashing teeth now set to the droning of the fridge and rattle of the air conditioning.

“We just wanted to give her a little more time,” said Mehmet, directing the words at his steel-capped work boots. The impulse to break bones and part flesh had now passed.

“She’ll be alright,” said Rob, “don’t worry about her. Let’s go; I’ll be sitting in on this one.”

Rob’s favourite thing to say was: “Fucking neo-liberals!”

That and: “Woodstock never happened!”

What he meant by that was that Woodstock as a cultural pivot-point had never existed. “No one ever changed the world by getting fucked up on acid in a field,” he’d say in the breakroom or in the smoking area, daring anyone to challenge him.

Rob had an opinion on everything, from what slave owner statues should be left up on plinths in public spaces, to which tattooed skin suits had the right to remain in museums and curiosity showcases. And, if that wasn't enough, he had plenty to say about which particular food, music, films and art you had to know and deeply appreciate before you could consider yourself truly British.

Mehmet had had to take a 'Life in the UK for New Citizens' test after washing up, half-drowned, on the very beach he now worked tirelessly to keep people from landing on. He had taken the exam shortly after claiming asylum from the hospital bed they'd hand-cuffed him to so that he wouldn't disappear into the paperless, illicit system of cash-in-hand labour exploitation known as the 'black economy'.

The British Conservative government, under fire for turning away masses of desperate migrants fleeing conflict zones and war-torn encampments (who then subsequently died in their droves along the French and Italian coasts) had handed out a couple thousand citizenship cards to sweep the whole matter under the rug. Mehmet had been informed that he'd been randomly selected for this white-guilt lottery and so proceeded to study up for the test from his intensive care ward cot.

However, in spite of this fleeting generosity, the Conservatives still made Mehmet pay the £5,000 examination fees himself. Selling his remaining rings and necklaces had only just covered the cost. There were two components to the test: a multiple-choice section and an essay segment. The multiple-choice part encompassed everything from English monarchs to the political machinations of Westminster, World Wars I and II to the British Empire (though this largely focused on how the UK had generously bestowed independence onto, and arranged reparations for, its settlements, colonies and annexed territories, rather than touching upon the

land-grab Falklands War, its sweetheart deals with the Nazis and its invention of the concentration camp in Kenya). In all the mock papers Mehmet took, England was always seen through the prism of a country that liberated folks, rather than a nation who had enslaved and subjugated them in the first place. The Essay section was about what made a true British citizen, though it awarded more points for mentioning fish and chips and The Beatles than it did to discussion of the democratic values of a nation, as Mehmet had discovered.

All-in-all, the ‘Life in the UK for New Citizens’ test had been the most expensive pub quiz Mehmet had ever participated in.

Passing it, however, had opened a dozen doors.

As such, he owed this country everything even as it — *his* country now, he supposed — wanted nothing to do with him and seemed to resent his very existence and the charity it had been obligated— under heavy media cross-fire— to doll out to him.

Being employed by the National Crime Agency had been another twist of the satirical knife. Mehmet had been drafted into the UK Navy to “honour his country and pay it back for all it had done him” and, after two years’ service, had been recruited by Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs. Another freak coincidence: at that point, HMRC had just started implementing a diversity quota programme used to deflect accusations of racial profiling (specifically anti-Islamic hatred) levelled at England’s Border Agency, by making the faces of its agents more and more “multi-cultural”.

Mehmet carried all this at the front of his mind as he sat once again opposite Thi in the interrogation room.

She had all but refused to speak since they'd re-joined the interview, with Rob now present. Rob who was pinging question after question at her like shrapnel.

“What were you planning on doing once you arrived in the UK? Did you have work lined-up? Contacts? Did the men who took your skin give you the name of a place? The address of a safehouse?”

He was already asking something else before the translator had finished.

“There's nothing to be afraid of here. I just want to ask you some questions, if that's OK?”

A nod.

“You have no permit, or right of residency here, is that correct?”

No response.

“You have the right to one phone call, would you like to take it?”

A shake of the head.

For the first fifteen minutes, Mehmet had remained silent throughout his overseer's onslaught, overcome with hot shame as he was at having thought about Thi's body earlier, about the sweat running between her breasts.

He reflected now instead on how all Thi must want were the same opportunities, the same hope for a new start, those very same basic human rights for which he had long ago lost two fingers and the chance to ever see his family again. Those self-same reasons for which Selin, he hoped, would one day risk everything too. Even now, there was something of his lover in Thi, in

the angle of light striking her jaw and the sway of her hair that made it look as if it had been carved from obsidian.

Mehmet nearly cried again. He had felt the presence of an invisible, numbing barrier between him and everything he interacted with — as if he were operating the controls of a first-person POV video game — ever since the derma chip connecting him to Selin had started malfunctioning. His ability to feel had been fossilised, but now something was shifting. An immense stone had been lifted from his chest, unblocking the floodgates. And now that they were open, all Mehmet could think about was how to close them back up.

“Are you working as a courier for these men? Did any of them co-opt you into carrying drugs for them, internally?” Rob drilled on, unabated. “Did you know it’s illegal to bring drugs into this country?”

Rob’s words amputated Mehmet’s train of thought.

The translator fed the question back to Thi, who once more inclined her head.

Suddenly, Mehmet’s heart was racing so fast, he feared he might choke on it. Why was Rob pressing her like she was the *trafficker*, and not the trafficked?

“It has come to our attention that you have tested positive for traces of heroin on the clothes you arrived in and under your fingernails. We are now going to have to do a full body search and run some tests to complete this line of investigation. I’m sure there’s nothing there — the contamination could have occurred at any point throughout your journey — but, nevertheless, we’re going to have to check.”

Thi turned at this part, eyes wide, to the translator who awkwardly patted her leg.

“Do you, or any of your family have a debt that you’ve come to our country to work off?
A drug debt or a gambling debt of any kind? No?”

The translator spoke. Thi froze. Mehmet froze. Kit fidgeted with her taser.

“Have you been, or are you currently, in the possession of any Class A drugs about your
person?”

A shake of the head.

“Do you know what a Class A drug is?”

A stiff nod.

“Did the men who took you to the farmhouse, or anyone else, give you a packet, or
packets, to put inside you?”

The Level 3 was talking to her as if she were a child, and now Rob was pointing
obscenely into his own open mouth and down at his crotch, which was uncomfortably bunched
up in his too-tight sailor suit trousers, to demonstrate.

Thi shook her head, one of her perfect eyebrows angled in surprise like a circumflex.

“Rob, hang-on, wait, when did you have her swabbed? I was here the whole time,” said
Mehmet having finally swallowed his heart.

“I had Kit run them while you were on break,” came the clipped response.

Mehmet turned to Kit, who had risen and now stood at the back of the interrogation room,
half-leaning on the one-way mirror, and shot her a questioning look. Kit avoided his gaze
entirely.

“It is now 15:37 and I’m suspending the interview so that Ms Morton-Taylor can conduct a full cavity search of the suspect.”

They left Mehmet in the room with the interviewer.

Her name, he saw now from a peeling sticker on her lapel, was Anh. He became aware that he was popping his knuckles and that Anh was looking at them and shuddering. To put her at ease he stopped, though following a similar compulsion, began stroking the dark hairs on the back of his left hand, and atop his fingers between the joints, until they were all combed and pointing in the same direction.

Neither of them said a word.

Kit brought Thi back in and radioed for Rob to join them. This time, she met Mehmet’s gaze and tried to smile, but the gesture soured on her lips. Kit sat and began once more to fiddle with the taser clipped to her belt.

Sharp lines of pain spread under Thi’s eyes as Anh helped her into her seat. The strip search, Mehmet knew from experience, was extremely invasive and the agony of her flayed skin beneath the gel plast couldn’t be helping, either.

“The blood and urine tests weren’t necessary in the end,” said Kit as Rob entered, laying a printout of the X-ray on the table.

The scan showed three packets lodged at the base of Thi’s large intestine. Their contents looked to have been double-wrapped in condoms or the ends of rubber gloves and tied off before she’d swallowed them.

Three white balloons floating down a grey maze.

“I’m arresting you on the suspicion of being involved in the importation of a controlled drug, you do not have to say anything. But, it may harm your defence if you do not mention when questioned something which you later rely on in court. Anything you do say may be given in evidence.”

“Make sure she gets all of that,” Rob said, interrupting the translator. “And make sure she understands the full context of what I’m saying. Make sure she fully understands her situation.”

Mehmet’s heart was racing so fast, he couldn’t get any words out.

There had to be 2.5 kilos of heroin inside her, easy. A weight worth thousands of pounds and likely resulting in an up-to-seven-year prison sentence.

The desire for unspeakable violence returned. There was no difference between Rob and the skin pirates. They just dressed differently, was all.

As Kit led Thi away in cuffs, Rob cornered Mehmet in the corridor: “Got a whole backlog of cases for you to work on,” came his reedy voice, “so you can drop this one. Kit will deal with her deportation.”

“Rob, Thi was actually offering us some invaluable information which indicated ... which spoke to ... ties to other anomalous cases like hers that we’ve seen a spike in. She’s not the one who should be in custody, sir, we can still undo this—”

“Women like her grow on trees.”

“I’m sorry?”

“Are you a team player, Mehmet?”

“No, what did you just say, about women like her?”

“Answer the question: are you a team player, Mehmet?”

“Yes, Rob, I’m a team player, but I’m also a Level 5 with protocol to follow and regulations to adhere to and you’ve just had a vulnerable individual, possibly a minor, arrested.”

“Spare me the white knight act. Our job is to protect our borders, isn’t it? Protect our citizens from anything that could harm them. Keep the poison out.”

“We have no reason to believe she’s involved in a drug ring ... this was about securing her route, nothing more. We have to look past it, focus on what matters here.”

“What is it you want, Mehmet?”

“I’m sorry?”

“You already have your citizenship and a well-paid job, all of which you were given, none of which you earned. So, what *else* do you want? A gold medal just for doing your fucking job? You want a brownie point or a Blue Peter badge just for following orders?”

Mehmet suddenly recalled how, a few months back, his neighbour Pat had called the police on him.

“I saw a man breaking in. He looked suspicious. He was suspicious looking.”

That’s what she’d said to the two responding officers.

Pat was seventy-two and walked her pug, Erny, attached to her Zimmer frame. She’d pause to smoke, nursing each menthol thin down to the filter, then thrust forward with her walker, lifting it and stabbing it down as if she had a personal vendetta against the pavement. Erny, almost a full stone overweight, the poor creature, would be dragged along, half garrotted, eyes straining, tiny legs hardly touching the ground.

Mehmet had sympathised with Erny's plight as he'd watched the poor bastard choking himself in an attempt to keep up.

"Your neighbour at 37, lady 'cross the street says she saw you breaking and entering," one of the Deal officers had said.

"With my own keys?" Mehmet had countered. "To my own house?"

Now, blinking away the metallic glare of the NCA office lights, Mehmet ventured:

"Sir—"

"Sir nothing. I'm not here to hold your hand, or kiss your arse through all this, Mehmet, so go do as you're told and sort through those outstanding cases."

"OK, Rob."

"And Mehmet?"

"Yes, Rob."

"Shave that beard off by tomorrow, OK? Can't have you looking as sketchy as the criminals we detain, can we? Team player, Mehmet."

Chapter 3: Alive

Yet another chalk cliff had sloughed its skin onto the beach.

The storm from the past night, the latest in a series of fierce tempests to strike Dover, had torn into the powdery monolith causing the foundations of a summer home to now jut over its lip. Mehmet could see the ravaged intestines of plumbing poking out into the void.

Only the bravest tenants still clung to the banks of these white chalk vestiges and would all, likely as not, he thought, be claimed by the sea along with their properties, savings and memories in the next five years.

The sea had taken bites out of the port, too.

The vast Dover seawall, its concrete building blocks patched up with an elaborate sequence of steel plates, was nevertheless being dragged away by the current one grain at a time, like a sandcastle in high-tide.

Mehmet stood, buffeted by the wind, one metre in from the crumbling cliff edge and took in the activity below through the blue-purple smoke of the cigarette he held between thumb and forefinger. He could feel the phantom itch of his amputated digits as he tapped ash from the fag onto the grass. The uncannily perfect flat surface of his finger's nubs — the handywork of the pirate's laser cutter — still filled Mehmet with a deep revulsion. He turned the webs of scarred skin that blanketed the perfect stumps towards the light. Like felled trees, he thought. The returning horror of that crossing stuck in his throat.

He forced himself to look away from his hand, to look down.

Reaching up for the comfort of combing his beard, Mehmet's remaining fingers encountered only skin. He'd forgotten that it was gone. He had shaved off the four months of growth, as per Rob's orders, the night before. As the dark beard fell in chunks into the bowl of his sink, he had felt his authority diminish with it. The loss made him appear ten years younger at least; he could have passed once more for the ignorant and naïve Merchant Navy recruit he'd been at seventeen. Mehmet's sense of security, of gravitas and protection, was gone: he was a man undone. But more than that, worse than that ... Rob had utterly emasculated him.

The steady drip of long-haul trucks made their way up from the Dover Cargo Terminal, chugging one or two shipping containers apiece up Union Street, past the Dover Marina across from Cruise Terminal 1 and the CEMEX Concrete Plant, to join the A20 on the route up to the M20. From there, likely as not, they would take the M25 up to London where they would disgorge their contents, or continue up to Nottingham, Sheffield or Manchester.

Every second truck was searched at Freight Clearance and though Mehmet and his fellow Investigation Officers diligently stripped truck beds, brought in sniffer dogs and questioned any drivers flagged by Customs Officers for acting suspiciously, they just didn't have the man-power to search everyone and every vehicle.

As such, fifty-percent of all contraband — smuggled drugs, weapons, black market ivory, animal pelts, illegal migrants, organs and the latest fleshy bio-tech augmentations— passed under their noses on the daily.

Just the week before, Mehmet had intercepted a Lithuanian trucker who'd been operating as a fence for 'Odaians' — flesh-tech sex toys made from human derma which was preserved, treated and papered over silicon genitalia or lifelike body frames. Each mould was filled with

electrodes which re-stimulated the nerves in the preserved skin from within to replicate the spasmodic muscle contractions, pulsations and undulations of their human phallic or yonic counterparts. Odaians varied from standard dildos and fleshlights to complete pelvic mid-sections and full doll-bots.

They'd caught the fence, after Mehmet had pulled him over for an inconsistency in his story, when a persistent banging from within the loaded container mounted into a crescendo of throbbing, thumping, discordant music. The sound rang the metal shell of the truck like a dinner gong.

It transpired that a box had fallen from the pyramid of cardboard packaging inside during the ferry crossing from Calais, consequently pressing the on-switch of one of the Ondaian flesh-bots which had then set about buzzing in a rictus of faux-pleasure. Its electro-pulses then triggered the silicon muscles of its neighbouring packaged parts until a domino reaction had the whole lorry alive with dismembered penises, vaginas, nipples and asses in a nightmare of re-animated organs, buzzing discontentedly with no one to pleasure.

Mehmet had been the one to open the door. He'd expected to see yet another truck filled with partially asphyxiated migrants crushed under each other's weight. This was becoming increasingly common as the 'CO2 Route' from East Asia to Europe had seen gangs growing greedier with the number of people they trafficked in a single container. Their greed was inversely proportionate to the care they took over the wellbeing of those trafficked.

But instead of desperate refugees, a cascade of Lithuanian sex-derm appendages poured out the back of the truck and knocked Mehmet off his feet. The writhing mouth of a crude, taxidermied sex doll, choking on its bubble-wrapped cocoon, mimed a drowned language as its

body thrashed about on top of him. In that moment, distorted as it — or *she* — was through the plastic, Mehmet had a hard time not thinking that the thing was human, mouth gaping as she popped some of the packaging bubbles with collagen-pumped lips, her blonde human hair veiling her slightly too large doe eyes. Her arms wrapped themselves around him and her hypermobile joints creaked as he strained against her. Her mouth yawned.

Mehmet wrestled with the doll like that for several seconds before Kit succeeded in tearing it off him.

“They’re getting more advanced,” Kit had said afterwards between sips of Kenco instant coffee. “Looked fucking real enough to me. *Felt* real enough when I pulled its fucking plug.”

“It was cold,” was all Mehmet could think to say, wondering if anyone had noticed his erection when they’d pulled the doll away.

The inventions — banned across the EU though, post-Brexit, something the English were liaising with the Americans about legalising — struck Mehmet as ingenious despite being inherently creepy. He wouldn’t be cheating on Selin if he slept with one of them. He could do it, guiltlessly, free of consequence, although, it seemed tantamount to necrophilia and Mehmet regretted that it wasn’t something he was capable of.

He had been in charge of sending off samples to the pathologists and forensic scientists at the London lab for further testing. Only when the results came back could the batch be shipped via government carrier to ‘The Queen’s Warehouse’.

The Queen’s Warehouse was a secure storage facility used to hold seized items: anything from a flick-knife to a sniper rifle, a gram of weed to fifty kilos of heroin, were stored there until whatever trial they pertained to ended and they could be destroyed. Lorries were also seized if

they contained a concealed ‘constructed compartment’ for smuggling purposes. The same went for cars, private planes and the rubber boats — with which Mehmet was intimately familiar — that were made for eight, but crammed with twenty migrants when they chanced the Dover Strait. Piles of these rubber boats were stacked to the rafters of The Queen’s Warehouse where they would gather dust until they were eventually sold off in bulk at market value at private auctions. The British government had been known to auction off gangsters’ Bentleys for a tidy sum, just as they profited from unclaimed stolen artworks and — according to a water cooler conversation between two senior officers Mehmet had overheard — some much less savoury cyborg SIM-FLESH oddities.

Mehmet was having a hard time keeping incidents such as these straight in his mind. Each day became increasingly absurd even as his capacity to be affected by bizarre and disturbing crimes declined. It was as if each new horror pushed the last one out. His connection to a line of investigation severed each time a dossier was closed — his retention enduring only as long as he was required to work a case. Nothing surprised Mehmet anymore. There was no longer any way for him, after seven years on the job, to differentiate between the profane and the mundane. It was all absorbed and excreted the same way. It was all content.

But it was worse than that, worse than the muted, woollen sensation he often got behind his eyes, as if all of his experiences were being mediated through a dusty, grease-smearred window. It was worse than losing the ability to find the funny in anything, like when that Trinidadian woman tried to smuggle a Death’s Head monkey through customs in her handbag and had attempted to cast a voodoo spell on Mehmet to convince him that he hadn’t seen it, that it was a figment of his imagination. When that didn’t work, she tried telling him that her illegal exotic primate was merely some type of rare cat. All throughout the encounter, Mehmet had

thought: this is absurd, this is unreal, this should be hilarious. But he rarely managed to crack a smile.

Perhaps even more worrying still, was when Mehmet found himself grinning involuntarily during the bleakest and most upsetting of situations.

There were times, still, when he *did* care. When he shucked the apathy that clung to him like water-logged clothing, when he remembered all he'd left behind and that the point of his job was to protect the most vulnerable and crack smuggling rings. Still, he had to balance that against the increasingly brutal Conservative Immigration Control bills which made it his responsibility to turn away and profile the very people who'd been to hell and back, just as he had.

He lit another Pall Mall and traced the contour of the landscape with it, letting embers fly along the ragged coastline, over the departing ferry choking the heavens with greasy plumes trailing from its smokestacks. Mehmet traced the contrail of a plane lacerating the blue dome of sky and the Cargo Terminal below, gridded with towers of orange, red, white, blue, green, yellow and grey shipping containers. He touched the cigarette to the cranes that wheeled their arms above the containers, drawing them on gossamer threads from boat to yard to truck like they were little more than brightly coloured confectionary.

The shadow of the Lithuanian truck driver's brush bristle moustache, white but for a patch of dark grey hairs in the centre of his philtrum — and the flowering of burst blood vessels across his bulbous nose like a crimson slime mould — were still etched in his memory as Mehmet lit Dover Port on fire and then set fire to the sky above it.

But that wasn't what Mehmet remembered most about the driver. What had jumped out at him at the time, and remained lodged in his mind now, was that although the man could pass for an unkept trucker with a drinking problem, there was something about the way he'd trimmed his moustache and waxed it up at the ends, and the fact that he clearly plucked his nose hairs, that made him seem a little too polished to be a lorry driver. He was just a little too refined to be in transportation. Mehmet hadn't quite broken the scene down in such detail at the time, but he'd known instantly just from a cursory impression of the guy that there was something which simply didn't jive with the narrative he was being presented with.

Indeed, Mehmet's hunch was proved correct when, an hour or so after the Ondaian were discovered, the driver turned out to be not at all as he seemed.

The trucker had been drumming with his thumb and forefingers — which, though ochre-smearred with nicotine, were surprisingly well manicured — on his jeans, claiming for the twenty-something-eth time that he was innocent: that he'd been paid to drive the trailer onto the ferry and into Kent and that was it: no questions asked.

The man maintained complete ignorance until they tried to bring a sniffer dog into his truck.

Izzy, a springer spaniel, was legally classified as a 'living tool' and could therefore be brought in for searches without a permit. But, when the driver saw her, he became agitated and blurted: "No dirty dog! No dirty dog inside!"

"Do you have allergies?" Mehmet had asked, trying to give the man the benefit of the doubt.

"No, but dirty animals filthy, they lick their own buttoles. Shouldn't go near live skins."

“Live skins? A moment ago, you told me you had no idea what was in the back of your truck, now you’re telling me you know they’re alive?”

“No. I don’t know. Eimantas no like dirty animals. Heard they no good for SIM-FLESH, is all.”

“I didn’t mention anything about SIM-FLESH.”

It was always funny how the abilities of suspects to speak English evaporated when they started to incriminate themselves.

Eimantas decided to hold his silence and kept drumming his arrhythmic beat on the leg of his oil-stained jeans: clearly he was not a germophobe as he claimed. Even though the dirt thing was obviously a pack of lies, Mehmet nevertheless went and cleaned Izzy’s paws to indulge the driver’s yammering about her leaving faecal matter on the front seat. The absurd lengths to which the British went to maintain politeness was something that Mehmet recognised in himself in this moment, a recognition that was met with a mix of pride and disgust. He even returned with the paperwork to corroborate the law which gave all Investigation Officers the right to search vehicles with trained animals.

The driver asked for a complaint form when they finally brought Izzy into the back of the truck. She sniffed and growled at the stacks of quivering genitalia and even tried to make off with a saran-wrapped phallus, but gave them zero signal that either drugs or firearms were concealed anywhere within the bots, nor that there was any contraband hidden within the structure of the truck itself.

It was at that point, as Mehmet and Kit were leading the driver to be interviewed, that he dropped the complaint form act and suddenly decided that he urgently had to go to the toilet.

Using bathrooms to flush anything incriminating — especially when a suspect hadn't yet been searched — was far from uncommon and so Mehmet had to accompany Eimantas into the toilet stall, to both of their discomfort.

Just as Mehmet suspected, he caught Eimantas trying to flush a packet of hash resin down the bog. He arrested him then and there for the possession of a controlled substance.

After that, knowing he was facing criminal charges either way, the driver ended all attempts at pretence and began to talk in earnest. Even before he dropped his Lithuanian accent and unwound himself from his stooped, labour-bowed posture, stretching out his neck and lifting his head up proudly like a fern shoot unfolding, Mehmet had known. He took great pride in being able to spot the fakers from a crowd, in being able to spy the players amidst the innocent. Mehmet sometimes had to remind himself that he was actually really good at his job. It wasn't every Investigation Officer who could pull a story apart within the twenty seconds between a truck pulling up to the Customs barrier and being allowed to pass through. You had to be quick. You had to trust your instincts, wholly. You had to be able to flay a suspect of their disguises.

“What's your name,” asked the driver, in flawless English, his thick cadence dialled back some eighty percent.

“Mehmet,” said Mehmet.

“And are you a religious man, Mehmet? I myself am a proud Muslim. You strike me as a man who might be one too?”

“Sometimes. I used to be” Mehmet replied, both surprised by his own honesty and hating Eimantas for having made a snap judgement based on Mehmet's appearance.

“Who are you really? What were you intending to do with the bots?”

“Well Mehmet,” said the driver, “there is a hadith in the Quran that goes: *Your body has a right over you. A stronger believer is better than a weak believer.*” He continued, “Our body, and our skin more specifically, is a mirror of our deepest selves. The Egyptians could diagnose all kinds of diseases just from looking at the eyes. The quality of the capillaries behind the cornea can help to identify health problems by pointing to a coronary blockage, for example.

“And the skin is no different. The skin is the parchment from which our bodies can be read. Liver spots speak to an over-exposure to UV rays, varicose veins indicate a likelihood of high blood pressure and if the skin on your ankle doesn’t bounce back when you press it, then it could mean that you’re pre-diabetic. Anyway, Mehmet, you get the idea.

“But to answer your earlier question, I am an anatomy professor at Vilnius University and I’ve made it my business to test out the theory that our skin acts as our second brain — to go back to the tenet from the Quran I quoted you — and even as our second soul, if you like. It lives and, even more strangely, can live independently of its host, I’ve found. Now, I didn’t say it was sentient, mind you, but it certainly brings us closer to Allah and, even, you could argue has always been the membrane that both divides and binds the divine and corporeal realms. Does this interest you?”

“My interests,” returned Mehmet with as much control as he could muster, “lie in finding out if you were taking illegal cyborg technologies into this country with the intent to supply.”

“In a manner of speaking.”

“You’re facing an extended jail sentence, heavy fines and the extremely high likelihood of losing your job, so I don’t think now’s the time to be speaking in riddles.”

“They were a gift. A gift to a rich benefactor of mine. Back home I sell these to sex addicts and perverts and the lonely through back-page ads, but that’s just a way of financing my projects. No, these, I was taking to Elsa Lustrine. The fashion designer turned radical influencer ... a true inspiration ... she hosts *Le Lust Show* ... perhaps you have heard of her? I’m told she now has some twenty million followers. I’m sure you’ve seen her show: very risqué stuff. Anyway, I was taking them to her because she was going to have them feature in her latest runway. It was going to cause quite the stir. Where does art end and the barbaric begin? She was going to show us the control that our bodies have over us, how our bodies mutate to be free from our minds. Our skin isn’t a casing or a shell, it’s we who are guests and our bodies the hosts. But now you’re going to imprison and incinerate my darlings, aren’t you? You’re going to destroy my babies?”

“Yes,” said Mehmet, running a hand in disbelief over the stubble where his beard had been, “I’m afraid we are.”

His cigarette tapped the containers, some of which could be holding automatic weapons, others cereal boxes. Some of them might contain tonnes of rubber tires, whilst others might enclose bottles of tiger bone wine or crates of rhino horn. Or, perhaps a container housing kitchen tiles would also have a hidden wall behind which drug mules shivered. Equally, a container full of asylum seekers hoping to work off their debts by labouring in the UK as nail technicians or “gardeners” in cannabis greenhouses, might also be carrying luxury cashmere jumpers encased in cellophane bundles.

Mehmet had quit smoking a few years back. But now, suddenly, he found himself smoking again.

He set the whole shipyard below him ablaze with the dying cherry of his Pall Mall, tapping it last of all on the detention centre and interrogation rooms of the NCA complex with its tinted windows and mud-grey breezeblock brutalist design.

“Welcome to the Dis-United Kingdom,” said Mehmet, spitting the words out with the smoke.

Pitching the butt into the void, he opened his arms wide and tried, for the first time in a long time, following some ancient and glorious compulsion, to pray.

Mehmet prayed for Thi in her jail cell awaiting deportation back to France. He prayed for the bodies of the VIVI-CELL sex bots that were arriving, probably at that exact moment, at The Queen’s Warehouse, and he prayed for the families of their bodies and for all the bodies, all the bodies alive and dead that were to come: the bodies that would never stop crashing, in wave upon wave into this port. Partly, Mehmet prayed for himself. It was a broken prayer, a disjointed prayer for Mehmet did not quite know what he needed saving for or from, but he did it anyway. But, most of all ... most of all he prayed for Selin who all too soon would make the journey across the expanse of blue before him. Selin who would face what he’d faced, and worse.

The wind died.

All of a sudden, Mehmet was screaming: “THERE’S NO ONE! IS THERE? YOU CAN’T HEAR ME IF YOU DON’T FUCKING EXIST? YOU’RE NOTHING!”

The wind picked up again and now it hurled his words through him and spun them backwards, scattering them inland.

A text from Kit.

Get your sorry arse down here. Got something I think you'll like.

Chapter 4: Harvest

“The shedding process represents the transmigration of souls, I guess,” said Kit between tokes of the Lithuanian driver’s hash.

“Yeah,” said Mehmet, checking once again that they were alone on the beach.

He was always surprised when she did that; Kit was one of the smartest people he’d ever met, but she would, more often than not, end a well-crafted thought with a note of uncertainty, with a qualifier.

“It passed from Egyptian iconography into Greek mythos which solidified this idea of it being a self-fertilising and self-destructive infinity loop. Yer know, that the top layer of the human skin is mostly dead, but it coats and protects the living layer beneath? Yer shedding like the snake right now, Mehmet. Yer filling the air with a million little parts of yer every second and I’m breathing them in. We’re breathing each other in, right now.”

After their shift ended, Kit had driven them down to the Marine Parade where she parked her Yamaha Aerox 50. moped on the Seafront walkway, resting on its kickstand, keys left in the ignition, helmet slung over the throttle. People were trusting in these parts and she claimed she’d never had anything stolen yet.

They’d made their way down the pebble beach of the Marine to sit by the moored yachts under the shadow of the crumbling cliffs.

That had been an hour or so ago, but time had ceased to exist as they smoked and watched the waves lolling in the burnt sienna light of the harvest moon.

The planet hung, impossibly close to the surf, like an exploded sun, turning all else around it purple as Mehmet and Kit blinked the after images of it out of their eyes.

Mehmet hugged himself. The resin had turned his lungs into a glowing furnace and he exhaled with an outpouring of relief, picturing a band of light emanating from his heart and sending the dust motes of his skin particles spiralling. Should he leave the joint alone for a while, he wondered. What if he became paranoid? What if he already was? Was he paranoid right now? Or, was he just being paranoid about his own fictionalised paranoia?

“We’re all eating our own tail to sustain ourselves. I mean, sort of, yer know?” Kit took another drag on the joint that she’d rolled thin and straight like a cigarette, before passing it back to Mehmet.

She had pushed up the damp sleeve of her white, regulation polyester shirt, to show him the ouroboros tattooed on her forearm. The epaulettes of her shirt didn’t align properly with her shoulders, nor did the stripes attained in the line of duty sit perpendicular, as they should have. Since having started out with the Border Force, Kit had had to wear a man’s uniform, as the women’s range only catered to, in her words, “anorexic bitches”. Rather than extending the range for plus-sized women, her overseers had opted to save money, ignored her request and asked her to make do with what was available. As such, parts of her garb sat either too tight or too loose about her. Kit had felt uncomfortable since day one.

The snake was inked in a single tone partway between charcoal and turquoise, its scales carved out in a combination of diamonds and triangles that started out with empty shapes for the snake’s belly — dividing Kit’s pale skin like the panels of a stained-glass window — and

became pattered with an increasingly concentrated collection of dots the closer the shapes got to its spined exoskeleton, until they were entirely black.

Its eye , a crescent of framed skin, winked at Mehmet. As he stared back, its body appeared to turn on a hidden axis, raising itself on Kit's body. It moved and yet stayed perfectly still, drawing its extremity further into itself even as its torso protracted, filling up the space it had just swallowed.

Mehmet could have sworn he saw its ingested body pulsating within the chamber of its stomach, that he could see the tell-tale bulge of its own auto-cannibalism.

Kit was mentioning how the symbol had helped revolutionize organic chemistry, solving the puzzle of a molecular structure ... but Mehmet found he couldn't tap into the meaning of her words.

The flaming moonlight licked the water that leaked up the beach towards them like an oil spill. It was all so impossibly beautiful. So beautiful it made Mehmet angry, angry that this beauty could exist side-by-side with the borderland warzone he lived day in, day out.

Kit was saying something about Gnosticism and Zen Buddhism and a turtle carrying the world on its back, but Mehmet tuned in and out of her words like a disrupted radio channel as the ouroboros lifted itself out of Kit's skin entirely to spin before him, its meridian of now emerald kites burning in the air like computer code.

Behind them, the Yamaha skulked in a wash of orange, the light slicing off its angular lines that suddenly seemed reptilian in construction. Had it moved? Was it stalking them, a mechanical Komodo dragon with its scaled carbon-fibre alloy limbs descending the bank of

pebbles towards them, soundlessly, patiently, deliberately? He looked again — it was just a fucking bike — and shook the image free.

“Ahhhhhh,” said Mehmet’s mouth and he exhaled the anxieties of the past few weeks in a single breath.

“Stuff’s good right? Shame we had to put most of it into that secure storage — good resin’s hard to come by these days. Talking of which, Rob had the derm bots sent to The Queen’s Warehouse before the tests came back.”

Mehmet — still hugging himself and passing his hands up and down the silky, pearl-like texture his arms had recently acquired to waves of pleasure — felt apprehension penetrate his euphoria.

“Wait what?”

“Exactly.”

“Wh— why ... why the fuck did he do that? Those parts probably belong to missing people. The bots probably used to be sex workers, executed criminals, murdered journalists, car crash victims and shit. He’s going to fuck up our paper-trail: he’s going to fuck up the chain of evidence and the case is going to fall through, Kit ...”

It had been so long since Mehmet had last gotten high — back in Selin’s uncle’s internet café in Istanbul some eight years prior — that he’d inhaled the resin too greedily. He had forgotten to wait for the effects to kick in in-between tokes and had held it in his lungs for far too long. You’re experiencing heart palpitations and a lack of oxygen, he told himself. Your

perceptions of yourself are out of whack with the world. What you're experiencing isn't corresponding with reality anymore. So, breathe, breathe and wait and breathe again.

He tried not to psych himself out further, tried not to picture figures wading down by the yachts, nor a flayed head bobbing in the waves.

Briefly, he considered that he was doing this to himself on purpose, that there was a masochistic part of him trying to nosedive the trip.

He'd trailed off, he realised, but couldn't remember exactly when he'd stopped talking. *Had* he been talking?

The snake's body was strobing between them, its reverberations sending shockwaves of ink flying into the air as its chest expanded and contracted in time with Mehmet's own erratic heartbeats.

In that moment, riding the crest of the high, Mehmet could have sworn he heard the noise of saltwater gurgling over each individual pebble that made up the beach and imagined himself wriggling between them — each orb as old as a black star — and slipping out into the riptide.

And then the thought presented itself: "What if they're alive, Kit, like the driver was saying ... not legally alive, but ... what if, in a way, they were ... *are* ... Then...what's going to happen to them?"

"Define alive," coughed Kit, polishing off the roach, and then followed this up with: "everything's going to hell in a hand-cart, yer know?"

"I know."

"But more than usual this time, Mehmet."

He could have sworn he'd seen movement amongst the leathery, bat-like wings of the yacht sails, lifeless and dripping night, as they were. Had a shadow just detached itself from one sail and flung itself into the shadow of the next? There was a moment where he thought he saw the blood-orange brilliance of the moon catch an unnaturally long forearm ending in a gnarl of broken fingers. And then it was gone.

Was he having a brain aneurysm? Was this the end? Would he die on this beach, this horrifically, fucking beautiful beach, his chest beaten in by invisible breezeblocks, his mind wretched and twisted?

“Well, just the other day this influencer lady started auctioning off parts of herself live on air. Said it was her right to share her body how she wanted and that if yer already putting a price tag on yer skin every time yer walk down the runway, every time yer snap a selfie, why not take it to the nth degree, yer know? The lady's clearly bat-shit, but power to her, I guess.”

“What was the upshot?”

“Huh?”

“The influencer, was it Elsa Lustrine?”

“Could be, yeah maybe. Sounds familiar.”

“What happened with the auction?”

“Some guy bought her nipple for a million quid, I think,” said Kit standing up and brushing gravel from the cuffs of her too-long trousers.

“Kit?”

“Mmmmm?”

“Did you plant the drugs on that girl? On Thi? The balloons were so close together at the end of her intestine ... they don't normally bunch like that. It was like they'd been pushed inside of her.”

“You're high, Mehmet.”

“Why did Rob have you swab her while I was out of the room?”

“Stop, Mehmet. Don't ruin this night.”

“If you did something, you should tell me. They'll deport her, they're going to deport her, Kit. And the French authorities aren't going to be anywhere near as compassiona—”

“Mehmet stop!”

Breathe and wait and breathe and wait and breathe.

He let it go.

Together, they walked up and down the length of the beach in silence.

After they'd each sobered up a little, Kit gave Mehmet a lift. Helmet-less, he clung to her on the back of the Yamaha going fifty-something down twisting, arterial, back-country roads. Eventually, she braked and he was home, facing off against the shared terraced house he rented.

Mehmet stood by the battered clapboard fence, gnarled with climbing roses, that bordered No. 36, not knowing what to say.

The Yamaha idled behind Kit, a hybrid of sleek metal, keratin and pleated flesh, engine like a rusty throat clearing itself.

“See yer tomorrow, champ,” she said waving and sped off into the night.

But Mehmet didn't see Kit the following day, nor the day after, nor for another week after that.

Chapter 5: Patching

The graft in his left palm itched as Mehmet reached for Selin with his thoughts, with his shivering body, with every part of him that was left.

In the cargo bay of the Dover shipyard, shaken and battered by the in-coming squall, he felt in that moment just how far away from each other they really were.

At least back when she'd gotten herself and her mother smuggled out of Damascus, some months back now, he'd felt something of Selin: a pang, a base kinetic memory stirring, burning, burrowing into the membrane of his subconscious through their exchanged derma, just as she'd felt his kinesis when he'd masturbated to his neighbours having sex shortly thereafter.

As he patrolled the Dover harbour — on security detail thanks to Rob — anorak hood hiked over his head, less than useless against the falling sheets of water, Mehmet experienced a stomach-curdling pang of shame at the memory. It occurred to him then just how vile and pathetic his attempt at obtaining human connection by listening through paint, plasterboard, wiring and fibreglass with his ear to a cup and his dick in his hand, to a pair of copulating strangers really was. How it paled, no, didn't even bear comparing to, Selin's own desperate bid for survival.

And right now, hunched up against the blitz of rain, Mehmet felt nothing of her.

Nothing but the itch.

He flicked through the assortment of memories he carried with him — memories of her, memories of them — in the hopes that one of them might re-awaken the channel between them,

might fire up the transplant beneath the patch of her flesh. He settled on one. The one that still hurt the most.

The memory of parting.

Selin had drawn him to her in the aftermath of their surgeries.

She lay on her back, bare feet pressed together, knees plié-ed either side of her so that they were almost flat with the bed in a diamond of tan lines, corded muscle, dark stubbled hair, cellulite and shadow. Then she pulled his lips to hers and murmured, “slow, slow, slow.”

Their patches exchanged every moment of contact in perfect synergy so that Mehmet both felt himself enter her and, as Selin, felt himself being entered. They were both halves and wholes as sweat slicked their bodies in that windowless room in the Istanbul heat. Mehmet moved his fingers into her mouth and tasted his own sweat on them with her tongue.

Selin asked him to remove the condom.

“I need to feel you,” she’d said.

They had been sex divided: each of them the male-female hybrid of the moon cloven by Eros and now, finally uniting their celestial pieces.

He felt the waves of pain-pleasure lapping within her like the surge of lightning bolts striking a conductor. She had only to want something and already he was doing it to her, such was the demoniac speed with which they transposed one desire onto the other. They licked and bit and tilted and turned on the whims of joint synapses.

Two flesh as one mind.

Mehmet felt Selin's skin tear free from one of the derma staples that the body artist had used to punch the square of his excavated surface into hers. Just one hour prior, the dark web surgeon had left her uncle's basement along with his belt of tools and half their life's savings, leaving them on the bare mattress polka-dotted with the blood smears left by bedbugs to familiarise themselves with each other's altered forms.

The surgeon — a golem of a man with thick lips, a double chin and a broken nose that had set off-centre — inserted a chip beneath each of their exchanged derms. Much like a tracker shot into the flank of an endangered animal to monitor its movements, he had explained, the radio-skin could be reached remotely from a great distance. But unlike endangered animals, the beacons emitted by the two derm-chips were only detectable to each other. Mehmet had tried to follow, but the knock-off oxycontin had turned his brain to rice pudding, his limbs to candied pumpkin, and only the odd, migratory word clusters permeated: “satellites transmute”, “emotional vivacity”, “resonance implant”, “don't think, but”.

This so-called skin artist they'd found on the dark web spoke to them throughout the procedure, numbing them — though not sufficiently — with a combination of local anaesthetic and cheap opium. After making four incisions on each of their palms with the scalpel and cutting the skin free beneath, he placed their “patches” in a solution for “soft embalming”, though to Mehmet it just looked like salt water in a Tupperware. Next, he wielded pointed scissors to part veins and arteries in their hands by breaking the membrane between each without damaging them, and lodged the transmitter chips into the nexus between in-going and out-going blood tubes, flush with the bones connecting to their fingers. Then he drove the micro-port at the back of the chip into the feelers of their nervous systems.

Throughout the procedure, Mehmet and Selin had maintained an unbroken grip on one another with their undamaged, dominant hands: her left and his right.

After the trackers docked, the golem had fixed their exchanged patches on top of each bloody mess with a miniature staple gun.

All this had happened in the bed on which they now fucked.

The white flare of agony from Selin's torn staple Mehmet took from her and made his. She clawed her nails down his back and asked, "Can I choke you?"

In response, he only smiled.

Mehmet felt her squeeze his windpipe shut with cool, dry hands and simultaneously experienced Selin experiencing his asphyxiation through him. Somewhere behind the dazzle of black and white spots strobing before him, Mehmet heard Selin sigh and saw her arched back and grasping limbs throwing a circus of shadows across the cracked Iziuk wall tiles as she came.

He pulled out and spilled tears and semen onto her belly.

Brick dust, mingled with sweat and lint flecked the soles of Selin's feet. He collapsed beside her. Sweat ran down Mehmet's chest and back to join the brown blood flecks on the bed.

Selin turned away.

In his medicated haze, Mehmet hadn't noticed the Istanbul night creep up on them. Selin leaned behind him and turned the dial of a pink terracotta lamp, its base moulded to resemble a wing shell. Its exposed lightbulb — the lampshade long having been chewed to dust by mice and cockroaches — jutted its neck into the gloom and fizzed uncertainly as Selin spoke:

“This doesn’t have to be sad, you know? You can choose how you want to feel about us, about this. For starters, this isn’t goodbye. You don’t have to make this into anything it isn’t. This isn’t the time for you to get all emotional again. There’s nothing you can tell me that you haven’t already.”

“OK.”

“Have I told you the story of the goat and the fig tree?”

“No,” replied Mehmet, “tell me about the goat and the fig tree.”

“Ok, so you already know I was born in a village near Al Zabadani, but my parents actually lived in the mountains even further north. My dad was a civil engineer, and my mum was a kindergarten teacher at the time — before they purged schools of female staff — and every morning, before Dad drove me to school on his way to work, I’d get up as early as I could to climb the fig tree in our yard. There, I’d watch the sun rise.

“I could see Damascus in the south if there weren’t any dust storms and the heat was low and I’d imagine how the Seven Gates of the city used to look when the sun hit them, before the last ruins of them were bombed into nothing, back in the days of the Holy Roman Empire. And I’d think about how they had each been arranged to align with a different star or planet.”

“Darling, you’re bleeding,” said Mehmet, reaching for her torn patch with the staple hanging from it.

Selin snatched her hand away and stuck it under a yellowed pillow.

“Don’t interrupt.”

“I’m sorry darling, I just—”

“If you interrupt, I’ll lose my place in the story and then I’ll have to start again.”

Mehmet couldn’t help but love her even more when she got angry and the collection of freckles on her cheeks and nose stood out even darker as her face flushed red.

“So, one July, when I was maybe five or six, I was up in the tree eating figs — sometimes I’d steal a pot of honey from Mum’s spice cupboard and bring it up into the branches and dip figs into it — and our goat — my dad had just bought a goat for milking — approached and was looking up at me. I threw a fig down for her, but she didn’t want it, I thought. There were a bunch of other fallen figs on the ground already, some of them were rotted through, but others weren’t too damaged. Still, the goat didn’t want anything to do with them and just trampled through them with her hooves and turned them to mush. But she was putting her hooves up on the trunk of the tree like she wanted to climb, so I got down and the goat went up and started eating all the figs.

“She only wanted them when she could get them fresh from the branch herself. I got worried she was going to eat them all, so I shouted at her and threw stones. There would be no figs left, no figs to eat as the sun rose, no figs for Mum to make into spicy jam. So, I was shouting and the goat climbed higher, trying to reach the branches that were the furthest out, and pulling the figs in by biting the branches and bending them back on themselves. She went further and further up and I know goats are supposed to be great climbers, but she kept climbing and then she fell and broke her neck.”

A silence hung in the humid air.

“She died?” asked Mehmet, having temporarily forgotten their shared pain.

“Of course she fucking died.”

“That’s it? That’s the end of your story?”

“That’s it.”

“What am I supposed to do with that? Darling, what’s it supposed to mean?”

“I think you know,” she whispered.

“Are you the figs on the ground? Am I the goat? Am I supposed to be happy with what I have now? Treasure this and not chase the impossible? Are you saying you don’t want me to leave?”

She was smiling at him and rolling her eyes.

“What?” he laughed, in spite of himself.

“Darling,” she said, even quieter now, “now you’ve heard everything *I* needed to say. We only have an hour left, so *show* me how you feel and let’s not talk for a bit. Show me with your body. Like this.”

And her knees crunched rusted mattress springs beneath yellowed rayon as she bent to kiss him.

“Keep hold of this,” she murmured when their time was up, directing the crumpled words at the effervescent bulb filament. “Take this with you. You won’t feel this close to me again for a long time. Carry this moment, Mehmet.” And with that, she turned away again.

Selin ran a bitten nail over the fissured ceramic tile-work gummed to the wall. She traced cerulean and cobalt petals adorning faded garnet and pistachio flower centres on each tile that, in the glow of the dying bulb, could have been mistaken for unpolished chunks of Alexandrite. Then, she drew the pad of her index finger along different, fluted garnet flowers, their painted

stigma forked like lizard tongues, passing her finger over the azure veins of leaves sequenced with evil eyes. As Mehmet kissed the cluster of moles on her neck, each one individually, his lover dug a nail into a split tile on the damaged wall — the wound in the building’s architecture likely caused by an earthquake, or suicide bomber, or both — and watched as a stream of salmon-coloured dust ran from it.

Without turning from the tiles, Selin said: “Take the piece of me and go.”

Mehmet went.

The rain picked up, driven droplets striking every exposed part of Mehmet with the precision of a pushpin being jammed into his skin. Water thundered off his work-issue waterproof. Water ran from his lids and nose and mouth to join the broken mirrors of puddles on the cement walkway.

Still, being out here checking the bays for stowaways and pirates, or any form of suspicious activity, in the pissing cold for five hours beat having to deal with the air of mildew and despair in the National Crime Agency office cubicles. Five hours of this beat Rob leaning over his shoulder for even five minutes.

Mehmet was losing it.

For the last week, since the interview with Thi, the woman with the piece of her missing, he had felt as if he were floating above the ground by a few millimetres.

All he wanted was to feel Selin beside him again and experienced a wave of nausea at the thought of her with someone else. The thought of her being fucked by another man. Absently — as a vinyl canvas emblazoned with a hammer and sickle was snatched by the wind from the wall

of the compound and tore across his field of vision, rope ties streaming behind it — Mehmet realised that he wouldn't care so much if she slept with a woman. Instantly, he hated himself for the double standard, but the thought of another man inside of her, inside of that sacred space ... that space that was his and could never be sullied by another, as long as he lived, made Mehmet want to bloody his knuckles on the corrugated walls of the containers. Selin was his. She was his. She was his, but he couldn't feel her. He realised he'd been tearing at a spot on his temple and flicked the scab into the blaze of storm weather punctuated by spotlights.

He allowed his jealousy to fall away with the thundering water.

Sleeping with someone else was probably the furthest thought from Selin's mind — all her available strength would be taken up with getting her family out of a war-zone. She was scrabbling to survive and here he was, fantasising about the damage he would wreck upon her imaginary suitors ...

Cold self-loathing poured over him.

But as his paranoia faded, the compulsion to feel Selin remained. He ducked into the shelter of an outpost, struck the flint of his lighter and placed his left palm over it. The palm where her square of fortune lines met his in a disjointed tangle as if someone had spliced two roadmaps of differing sizes and configurations together. Their lifelines didn't join up. Their lifelines hung, suspended by keloid scarring, one above the other.

Mehmet tried to summon an accurate picture of her in his mind as he brought their hand down further onto the open flame.

Her skin wriggled to free itself from the heat, to separate itself from him, the host.

He forced himself to keep the hand still, in spite of the writhing, painting in his mind's eye a picture of the moles on Selin's neck that congregated in the shape of the Big Dipper. His hand burned and he pictured the copper ear-stretchers she wore that had been moulded in the shape of seven-sided stars. Her honey-brown eyes that always made her pupils look like insects trapped in amber. The freckles on her nose. Her one dimple on the left side of her mouth that crinkled when she smiled, even though the tiredness and melancholy never left her eyes.

And then he was in her skin.

For a fragment of a second, Mehmet saw as she saw, or rather felt as she felt, for Selin was in pitch blackness, her back cramped against a curved metal wall. She rocked from side to side as if being drawn along tracks. There were other bodies with her there in the impenetrable dark. He could feel their heat, smell their breath. There were other smells in there too, stronger, more violent smells. Someone was coughing and he, or Selin, banged their head against the container as she turned to help them. Then came the screeching of brakes and Mehmet knew then, upon hearing that sound, that Selin had stowed away on a freight train.

All was still. The rocking stopped.

A small circular hatch opened above their heads, momentarily framing a perfect cut-out of blue sky. As a cylinder of light punched down from the opening and illuminated the huddle of bodies, Mehmet saw that the woman who had been coughing was Selin's mother, Selma. Though her face was smeared with oil and she'd lost much of her hair since Mehmet had last seen her, what was left of Selma's locks remained the same defiant shade of iron.

Into the circle came the ruddy face of a woman with blonde, buzzed hair and a livid pink birthmark on her cheek the shape of Madagascar.

“Time to go,” the woman said, halfway between an order and a request. Though she spoke in a Slavic tongue, Mehmet could understand her, somehow: through Selin’s body the harsh consonance and plucked vowels had morphed into Turkish. Translated by her skin.

Mehmet patched out, but the smell of the container followed him back to Dover harbour, clogging the air around him beneath the soaked outpost.

Gasoline.

And something else. Something terrifyingly familiar. Something volatile that reeked of chemicals with an underlying sickeningly sweet odour of fruit ... of raspberries.

Formalde-HIDE.

He dropped the lighter and sucked at his burnt hand. His saliva amplifying the pain tenfold. Then he stumbled onwards, into the wet, trying to out-walk the pain.

Mehmet was so absorbed, half striding, half crouching like that in the cargo bay — licking and cradling his hand with its second, if not third-degree, burn — that he didn’t hear the drone until he was almost upon it.

It hung there in the rain that had calmed to a drizzle, retractable limbs slack and dripping, propellers little more than a shimmer above it, a glitch in a simulated grey sky. Green and red lights pulsated from the extremities of its Quadcopter cross frame as it sat in its column of air, seven feet off the ground and four feet away from him, never deviating in latitude or longitude by a single degree, as if anchored there at the end of an invisible mobile. A cluster of matte-

finish bug-eyed cameras hung in egg sack formation about its abdomen. It buzzed at him with the urgency of a wasp's nest that had just been kicked.

Mehmet let his hand fall. Through the blur of water droplets, he thought he saw the camera eggs swivel in his direction.

It was looking at him. The thing was definitely looking at him. It wasn't government issue; for starters, the NCA certainly didn't have the budget to afford that level of tech. Nor was it interested in dealing with the shitshow liability of having one of them tampered with or hijacked by snakeheads and turned against them. In spite of such reassurances, Mehmet couldn't shake the idea that, with its carbon fibre black carapace, the drone looked decidedly military-grade. At any rate, nothing should have been stationed there, drone or otherwise.

Mehmet drew his telescopic baton and took a step towards it.

The drone descended by a foot and advanced by two, closing the gap between them.

They were almost eye-to-eye, the wasp nest seething, its propeller blades frothing with spray.

He realised then that the drone had been posted outside the Reefers: the refrigerated containers used to maintain the temperature of everything from apples and frozen meats to explosives and toxic gasses. It was essentially a glorified storage unit that could be set to anything between room temperature and minus thirty degrees Celsius.

Mehmet snapped the baton in the air so that it extended to its fullest length and took a step to his right, boots splashing puddle water, and swung at it.

The drone retreated.

He advanced and swung again, the baton slashing viciously through the air between them.

Again, the drone retreated and this time he had the distinct impression it had anticipated the movement, had started shifting even before he'd sent the command to his arm.

This time, Mehmet stepped backwards to see what it would do.

It advanced.

Whatever movement he made, the drone matched him, sidling through the rain along precisely calculated coordinates.

Drones were controlled remotely, so that meant that whoever was handling it was somewhere in the immediate vicinity. Mehmet twisted about him, but could see nothing apart from the glistening containers and the crane lights winking and blinking above him like lost stars.

He radioed for back-up and Himari, another Level 5 from Mehmet's unit, said he'd be there in twenty.

A lot could happen in twenty minutes.

Mehmet started walking away.

A step. The drone shifted, blades thrashing. Step. Shift. Step. Shift. Now, walking brusquely Mehmet made for the other side of the Reefer's perimeter, the drone tracking him.

When he reached the far corner and stopped, the drone stopped with him. It parked itself in the halo of a halogen lamp affixed to the twist lock that held the steel walls and hatch covers of the Reefer's sections together. It levitated there in the mass of white-water droplets streaking between them.

He moved, quickening his pace, the impact of each footfall echoing amongst the vast stacks of containers as he took off down a freight corridor, zigzagging between different aisles.

Mehmet paused beneath a crane, rain falling in curtains from its arms and titanium cables as it loaded and discharged cargo from a docked freight ship. The drone's whine was also being thrown between the containers as it pursued him, sounding both as if it were right in Mehmet's ear and half a mile away.

Had he given it the slip?

Though the thing had looked as if it might have been military-issue, someone had tampered with it. There had been something odd about its structure, something about its form that hadn't sat right with him when he'd first spied it. When it had approached him for the second time, that was when Mehmet noticed.

There was some sort of organic material meshed into the belly of the machine. A kind of needle hung from its paunch, a modified stinger, barbed like a scorpion's tail, Mehmet thought. The needle had been wrapped in a gleaming, rain-slicked canvas that put him in mind of the way light struck the insides of a dissected kidney during a biopsy.

Who was working it now? Who had sent the fucker?

Mehmet thought about Kit — whom Head Office had informed him was on “indefinite leave” — and her sudden absence. He thought, too, of the Lithuanian driver's derm-bots and the still-pending results from the forensic scientists' pathology tests. Someone had been fucking about in the shadows with his leads and, whilst Rob was certainly implicated, Mehmet couldn't rule out Kit's involvement either. Kit had always been careful with money and, with her old-school hippie outlook that was so antithetical to Rob's, had generally resented the need for

accumulating wealth and material possessions. Could something as obvious as money really have turned her? Corrupted her? Mehmet mused on whether her absence meant that she had been punished or rewarded for her actions, provided indeed that the actions were hers. Had she known too much and been taken out? Or, was she being compensated for her seedy involvement with holiday pay until things quietened over? All of that presumed culpability, but perhaps Thi really *had* just been smuggling drugs and Kit really *had* just been doing her job. Maybe Kit really was ill and the effects of the resin were warping Mehmet's ability to tell the players from the innocents.

But he had learned to trust his instincts for a reason. Kit had never told Mehmet where she lived, so there was no way of visiting her. And whenever he'd called since her disappearance, it had rung straight to voicemail. That had hardly set his mind at ease, had hardly appeased the thought that, if she'd been corrupted, there was an ethical rift in their friendship that could never be papered over were she to return. A divide in what Mehmet had believed to be their shared values of protecting the most vulnerable, no matter the cost, no matter the ensuing bureaucratic nightmare. If what he suspected to be true turned out to be so, then they would likely never reconcile.

If.

If ... if ... if ...

Mehmet could still hear the drone in the background, but more faintly now, further away.

In a fit of panic, he realised that he had disclosed his suspicions about Thi's skin graft to no one but Kit. No one but him, and her, had pieced together the obvious, that Thi hadn't lost her skin to save a cancer patient as they'd told her. The pen she'd mentioned could only have been a

tattoo gun, which meant that these women were being made into art, then having the art torn out of them.

If only they could find the farmhouse outside of Calais, the link to what seemed like a factory-production scale of trafficked skin paintings, of taxidermied brushstrokes.

If Kit was the only other one to know, and something had happened to her, then he, Mehmet, was the end of the trail. Those involved in the derma smuggling — if they were the ones who'd sent the drone — certainly had a vested interest in making him take the truth of it to his grave.

Were they after him? Who the fuck were “they”?

There was no wider conspiracy here, he'd read too many crime novels, had smoked too much of that resin; what were the lasting effects of a drug like that? Could it result in long-term psychosis? He was being an idiot. Kit was sick and Rob was an asshole, and that's all there was to it.

But the drone was back. Or had it already been there for some time? It was higher up now and one aisle across; a fixed point in the torrent.

The cranes slid on their giant iron sleepers above cargo holds as deep as 40 times 40 meters, trailing vast bands of shadow behind them which passed molasses-like over Mehmet and the buzzing, fleshy mosquito.

The voices of port workers, in the act of lashing the containers high up in the holds, trickled down to them with the rain.

In that moment, Mehmet noticed a pile of abandoned lashing gear: a turnbuckle (used to twist and tighten the steel rods that secured containers), a snarl of short bars, long bars and stray water-logged twist locks at the foot of the aisle 47 containers stacked like Lego bricks. Would the gear make for better weapons?

The drone dove, lights flashing in a rippling seizure, its stinger out.

Mehmet ran, caught his boot on a crack in the concrete and pitched forward, baton sliding from his grip as he became airborne for a handful of sickening moments, feet knocked out from under him.

And then he was slamming into the wet concrete, palms and chin first.

In a blink, the drone was upon him, scorpion stinger punching through anorak, jacket, shirt, through the skin and muscle of his exposed back like they were paper.

Mehmet screamed. The noise of the propeller blades was so loud that he could see the wasp nest burst apart in his mind.

The drone rose and dove at him a second time as Mehmet lunged through the water for his baton.

Chapter 6: Ink

At the last possible moment, the drone pulled up short, hovering out of reach, and angled its cameras at Mehmet, as if contemplating something.

Whatever decision it had been about to make was disrupted by the arrival of Himari who, after the radio silence must have taken to searching each aisle systematically. Good old meticulous Himari.

A split second after Mehmet's back-up sprinted towards them, the drone was gone, zipping off into the sombre heavens. Mehmet was left shivering in the puddle of water, the hole in his back throbbing.

Now, retracing his steps in the day following the attack, Mehmet's injury made itself known with every bastard movement. Nothing had been implanted within him, as far as the scans he'd run were concerned; nor had the tox-swabs Himari took of the wound come back indicating any kind of poisonous agent. Seemingly, the drone had only made a puncture wound and been interrupted before it could do anything else.

But had it ... could it have taken a small piece of him with it? A minute disc of his derma when it flew away, no more than a millimetre in diameter? When he'd gone for a slash earlier in one of the chemical toilets that bookended the shipyard, Mehmet had turned and squirmed to catch a reflection of it in the greasy plastic mirror. He wanted to see if there was any tell-tale bruising surrounding the hole that could possibly denote a sample extraction.

There was some — a mottle of yellow and green — but not as much swelling as might have been expected if indeed a small cylinder of him were missing.

Even then, Mehmet couldn't be sure.

As they walked the length of the promenade in the direction of the Reefers for the second time in twenty-four hours, Mehmet scoured the silvery skyline for the flesh-wasp, but it was nowhere to be found.

He cast a sidelong look at his companion.

Himari had had reconstructive surgery on the left side of his face from where a freight-container door, rigged with explosives to protect a shipment of Kalashnykovs, had blown his ear and upper jaw to pulp. Patch-ups were expensive, and his health coverage had chipped in only for the bare minimum surgery package. As such, there was a disjunct between Himari's own East Asian complexion and the skin they'd fixed him up with. "I'm now part Indian," Himari would joke if anyone commented on the ragged mingling of the two tones were one third of his face was cast in dermal shadow.

The truth behind his operation was a lot less funny: lighter skin was valued more highly. Anything that passed for Caucasian cost a mint at private clinics and practices, as opposed to the free coverage under the National Health Service, which could only afford to acquisition darker, less desirable skins. The skin of Nepalese women, in particular, fetched a high price for the boob jobs and butt enhancement surgeries of the white elite, in particular the wives and girlfriends of football stars who enjoyed passing off the fairer skins of desperate and disadvantaged Asians as their own.

If his skin patch didn't already make him distinctive enough — Himari always joked that he resembled the Phantom of the Opera in negative — the prematurely white streak in his spiked-up fringe, sure did.

The acne that pocked Himari's cheeks like meteor craters, his body that was both powerfully muscular and inexplicably lean and his ability to be quietly, almost undetectably, hilarious had drawn Mehmet to him, just as the bond of kindred misfits had drawn Mehmet to Kit. Himari had helped Mehmet out with a handful of modern slavery cases that had gone cold over the years, thereby allowing him to expose several 'sex rings' that Mehmet had never been able to pinpoint. He, like Mehmet, was a hard-worker, happiest on the periphery, keeping to himself in smoking areas and empty breakrooms away from the racket of their more socially boisterous colleagues. Most of all, Himari had never allowed himself to be seduced by Rob's charm and, in Mehmet's eyes, that made him an ally right now.

They'd both chosen to switch to overt body armour, moving their 'POLICE NCA' from black jacket to tactical vest. An Investigation Officer had the right to sport either and Mehmet had, up until that moment, opted only for the black cargo trousers and white shirt, but the incident with the drone had rattled him.

To his belt, he'd added a can of synthetic pepper spray, known as 'PAVA', which now clinked beside his cuffs and baton with every strained step. He resembled the stormtrooper, the state thug he'd always hated. But this was not the time to be caught with his trousers down, as the saying went.

Mehmet and Himari had confiscated a considerable cache of ivory earlier that morning. A decent haul all-told. They had intercepted a gentleman who had been smuggling the tusks in

from Sierra Leone inside his dry cleaning suit carrier which he'd slung, casual as you please, over his shoulder. The man had three pieces with him, the largest measuring 38.5" and weighing 10lbs approximately, whilst the two smaller pieces measured 30.5" and 29.5", and 6 and 5lbs respectively. His goal had been to transit through Calais then further down to Paris where the market value of the ivory would have fetched him 600-925 euros/kilo.

It was always a question of story.

Mehmet always did his best to test an individual's story rather than profile them based on any specific ethnic factor. He took great satisfaction in the mental athleticism of always separating the person from their socially ascribed labels. The ritual of looking for the story was, he believed, something that set him apart from the other Level 5s. He wanted to prove to himself, and Selin most of all, that a uniformed officer wasn't just a coercive entity with a baton, but a force for good in this sorry world. It went even further than that: Mehmet had promised himself that he would be more than yet another token migrant whose job it became to refuse entry to other migrants who'd been through the exact same horrors as him. Mehmet wouldn't play ball. He wouldn't be the Conservative government's pawn. He would rise out of his apathy and he would act.

Nor would he be a walking paradox. Corny as it was, Mehmet wanted to be the change he saw in the world.

Most people never gave any specific consideration to the details of their cover story. The man from Sierra Leone, for instance, had been wearing a very loud shirt — so that his contacts in Montmartre could easily spot him at the station — and a carefully constructed air of

nonchalance, which Mehmet had seen through right away and so had picked him as a subject to intercept.

Mehmet might not have stopped and frisked the man if he hadn't given his reason for travelling to Paris as being to buy a milking machine for his cattle ranch. It transpired that he wasn't a cattle baron at all, but a pickpocket who had gotten into debt to some very bad people with Mafia connections who were getting him to buy their silence one blood-stained tusk at a time.

The man was a pain the whole time Mehmet tried to deal with him as he kept attempting to steal Mehmet's cuffs and watch, just for fun, throughout the interview. Mehmet finally obliged him the cuffs by slapping them on the protesting man's wrists.

So, it remained about stories for Mehmet. If he didn't think about those departing through the tunnel or arriving via ferry as a bingo board of races, religions and genders, some of them throwing up more red flags based on the biased NCA training manual than others, then Mehmet found he was able to do a halfway decent job in a rigged system.

Which stories gelled and which didn't? Mehmet had decided to trust Himari with the story about the drone — a story which most definitely didn't gel. He didn't know a huge amount about Himari aside from the fact that he flew kites and wind-surfed on the weekends and that he, like Mehmet, had no family living in England. Additionally, Rob had threatened to have Himari deported for refusing to strip search individuals with no probable cause, so whilst Mehmet had no reason to assume that Himari's motives would align with his own, he knew with absolute certainty that they *wouldn't* align with those of their Level 3 superior.

They had taken their lunchbreak together to hunt through the Reefers.

On their way there, the sky just as grey, though a whole lot less ominous now the rain had cleared, Mehmet made a call to the forensic scientists up at the London lab.

It nearly rang out before a sharp click told him the receiver had been scooped up.

“Ello!” a breathless voice trilled.

“Mac, how are you? It’s Mehmet from down at the Dover Docks. One of ours sent you a bunch of samples from some freak-o sex-bots last week. Results are quite a bit overdue, so I’m ringing to chase up.”

“Think I know the one, gov, lemme just check here for ya. Easy to mix ’em up ya know? We get so many of these Aug-M-ex cases these days, sometimes it can be ’ard just to keep track of ’em.”

Mehmet was glad it was Mac who’d picked up and not one of the others; forensic scientists were hardly known for their interpersonal skills and Mackintosh was one of the very few exceptions to the rule.

“How many are we talking, Mac?” asked Mehmet as he listened to the techie banging the draws of various filing cabinets open and closed in the background.

“What’s that now?”

“You said you were getting a bunch of these kinds of cases, what’s the damage?”

“Ya said yours were sex-bots, right?”

“Right.”

“Well, gov, we’ve sure ’ad our fair share of ’em, but also some soft-preserved derm sheets in brine vats, rolled up like carpets. Some flesh-tech mods like gun grips, gaming consoles wrapped in flesh ...” More drawers screeched open and slammed shut. “Some skin canvasses primed for inking, an’, more disturbingly, some pyro-flesh prototypes for things like grenades and claymores an’ the like that require some special kind of DN-AD bond with its owner, a little like fingerprint recognition on your phone, gov, see where you can program it for a particular flesh, or muscle memory sequence so that only one person can activate the fucker with a unique squeeze or series of prods into its skin wrap. Taylor-made warfare, gov.”

“Jesus!” Mehmet was more than familiar with most of those items, but the advancements in organic weaponry Mac had just described were something new.

“Oh shit,” said Mac, “nearly forgot the most disturbing one of all. They’ve been working on these drones, you see.”

Mehmet’s coffee-flooded stomach spasmed.

“They’re your typical surveillance hover-craft lark, gov, ’xcept they ’ave this homing pigeon tracker function built into ’em. Well, works more like a sniffer dog, really, a bloodhound crossed with a hummingbird, if ya like.”

Mehmet didn’t.

“They jacked a sort of mechanised stinger into the underside of the thing — still at the prototype phase, is my guess — and wrapped it in calloused skin for the flesh memory value, as per. Anyway, once a bastard like that’s had a taste of ya, bonne-fucking-appetite, gov, is all I’ll say. I’m just glad none of ’em are out on the market as of yet.”

“What does one of those things do with you once they catch up?” asked Mehmet, doing his best to keep his voice steady. Himari passed a scarred hand through his white quiff and offered Mehmet a Benson and Hedges cigarette. He declined with a shake of his hand.

“Your guess is as good as mine, gov, but this one had a feature where you can dock one of those grenades I told ya about beneath the stinger, so ciao bang, most probably.”

“OK.”

“Yeah, anyway, there’s this arms manufacturer in Azerbaijan churning out hybrid arms that are a mix of Russian-grade military engineering and ‘soft-tech’ as MI5 are now calling it ... Russians man ...” some swearing as Mac caught his finger in a drawer, “indirectly involved, obviously, but it still traces back to ’em through the black-market one way or another, don’t it? Either way, someone’s making a killing, aren’t they?”

“Seems so,” said Mehmet after an uncomfortable pause.

“Sorry gov, man, I mean Mehmet ... that was in poor taste.”

“Any joy with those lab results, I’m on the clock right now.” He held up one finger to Himari, to indicate that he was nearly done, who nodded.

“Yeah gov, sorry, ok, ok, think I’ve found the fucker. Here we go.”

“And?”

“Says a few of the bods matched against a few missing and murdered on the EU search list. Lots of non-matches here, too. Samples show a cross-section of demographics here, gov — ties to all seven continents. This is a helluva shopping list, a helluva operation. Whoever put this together was either a genius covering their tracks by spreading the derm pool out, or they’re

desperate and taking anything — sorry, *anyone* — who’s turned their way. Or maybe it’s bespoke. Considered that, gov?”

Mehmet scratched at the bandaged punctured wound through his body armour.

“Still there?”

“Yeah.”

“How did you say you came by these, again? Would love to correlate the readings against some of our other cases.”

“No time Mac, just tell me, why did no one call our team?”

A pause.

“Says they did, gov. Says we called one of the other Level 5s in your unit, four days ago.

“Who, Mac?” Mehmet asked, feeling his wound twinge.

“Catherine, says ’ere, Catherine Morton-Taylor.”

Catherine. Cath. Kate. Kitty. Kit.

“She didn’t tell you?”

“Oh yeah, course,” said Mehmet, thinking fast, “stupid me, it’s coming back. She left something on my desk about it. Must have slipped through the cracks. Crazy week, sorry for the trouble, Mac. Thanks for your time.”

Mehmet took no satisfaction in being proved right. If Kit was complicit in covering up the unconscionable sources of these sex products, then she was complicit in *all* of it. His belly

felt like it had been filled with rocks and he worried that he might sink to the ground with the weight of them at any moment.

“Sure, gov, though if you fi—”

Mehmet hung up.

Himari asked no questions, which suited Mehmet just fine; he suddenly wasn't in the talking mood.

They had been unable to find the drone anywhere on the cameras; it seemed to have successfully steered itself from the blind spot of one security stream to another without ever once being picked up. The perimeter cameras hadn't recorded signs of anyone controlling the drone from a vantage point either. The cyborg copter had disappeared without a trace.

Rob was away on a conference which was, likely as all hell, Jean Gibson's appalling 'Anatomical Gift Act' talk in London. Though Mehmet's boss had evaded all questions on the subject, it was far from impossible that Rob was accepting bribes from Jean at that very moment.

So, today Mehmet and Himari were unsupervised; accountable to no one but themselves.

After asking around, Himari succeeded in getting one of the dock workers to open the Reefers on the pretence that their routine inspection had come early this month.

One-by-one, the dock worker named Ivaan used a turnbuckle to loosen the twist locks holding the containers secure. The panel doors of the first container popped open. Because the drone had been hovering outside the Reefers, they had no idea which container it had been protecting, if indeed it had been guarding anything.

The first two contained pears, the third was stacked to the ceiling with giant wheels of creamy, ripe smelling cheese which let out a wave of cloying, rotted odour as Ivaan jimmied the doors. The smell hit Mehmet like a wave and made him promptly sit down, feeling faint.

“That reminds me, I should wash my socks more often,” said Himari so quietly that Mehmet almost missed it.

The fourth container proved Mehmet’s hunch right.

Slung from meat hooks between sawn-in-half frozen pig carcasses were a dozen protective bags containing skin suits.

The things had been flayed flawlessly.

Splayed out as if they had spent years drying in some sort of vast flower press, the flat skins had a crescent moon cut out of them where the neck ought to be. The backs and torsos of each ended in half-sleeves and half-leg lengths of skin.

Every inch of the suits was covered in the most spectacular tattoos Mehmet had ever seen.

Himari pointed between the tattooed spindles of a red spider lily and the duck-egg blue of a dragon’s eyes at the face of a carnal devil-like monster covering most of the back and buttocks of a suit, its brow furrowed in consternation, contoured in dark violet.

“An ‘Oni’,” he said, as if no further explanation were necessary.

To the left of that skin suit was one featuring a warrior with the tail of a vast snake set between his teeth.

Himari named each monster in turn.

“A ‘Kappa’, a ‘Hyosube’, a ‘Jorogumo’. The last creation noted by Himari featured a woman holding an oil paper umbrella over her head. Her waist was bound. She sported a plum-blossom dress from which sprouted the countless hairy legs of a grey-brown insect. She held a gossamer leash on the end of which appeared to be a nearly hatched pupae.

“Half woman, half spider,” added Himari, sweeping back his striped hair.

The skin suits resembled the templates used to pin to fabric for cutting clothing panels, as if spewed from the Imaginarium of some demented fashion designer.

Cold ran in streams from bifurcated pig snouts and the crimson maw of broken ribcages. Mehmet looked at the spiked hooks, some of which pierced strung-up back trotters, whilst others were linked to the wire frames of coat hangers holding the suits. The more he switched his focus from one to the other, the less Mehmet could tell them apart. The shorn ribs began to look like the beautiful daubs of light in some abstract artwork, whilst the flesh suits, patterned with teeth and tail, talons and scales in shocks of primary colours more and more closely resembled meat.

“Look,” said Himari, the mismatched juncture between his graft and the rest of his face twisting into a grimace.

Splashed in fresh paint across the hindquarters of one of the gutted pigs were the words:
GO HOME!

Chapter 7: Satyr

The secure facility that was The Queen's Warehouse reminded Mehmet of the storage depot Indiana Jones put the Ark of the Covenant into at the end of *Raiders of the Lost Ark*.

It consisted of huge amounts of very high, numbered, racking. The link to the British monarchy always made Mehmet laugh, especially when he spliced Buckingham Palace and this sterile, low-budget cyberpunk aesthetic enclave together in his mind.

The different areas of the warehouse were divided up into types of commodity, such as 'Wildlife Goods', 'Cigarettes' and 'Alcohol'. 'Drugs and Firearms' were stored under even more secure conditions further back in the throat of the giant hanger.

Each site was security controlled and required prior notification, in addition to an ID card being presented upon arrival.

When he'd called ahead to 'advise presence in advance', Mehmet had given his reason for getting in as seeing the derm-bots, though that was only partially true. In reality, he had every intention of accumulating evidence to prove that Rob and Jean were syphoning off dismembered body parts from one of the most secure government locations in the country.

It was certainly going to ring alarms further up the chain of command if Rob, or anyone else, were to be listening out for them, so Mehmet may as well tell a partially defensible half-truth if his whereabouts and motive were to be questioned.

Each doorway was secured with an airlock so that you couldn't proceed from one section of the warehouse to another until the door behind you bolted itself shut.

Mehmet followed Mahmoud — one of the guards on duty — through the first doorway. The ensuing hiss of the lock was followed by the popping of his eardrums as the chamber repressurised.

While Mahmoud keyed in the pin for the second door of the airlock, Mehmet calculated the quickest way to find what he was after. Goods were booked in under a case number. Individual items within that case held a unique ‘seal’ number and accompanying exhibit reference which varied from agency to agency, but usually turned out to be the ID and sequential number of the items the officer in question had found. Given Mehmet had been the one to find and process Eimantas’ perverted curiosities, the ‘seal’ numbers for each dermal toy read something like: ‘Akhavan0001’. The contents of the Lithuanian professor’s truck had been vast, so the seal numbers ran all the way up to ‘Akhavan0378’.

Mehmet had had to call in a special favour in order to search through the items himself. A recent update in protocol meant that you were supposed to request access to a particular item then wait for it to be brought to you in an airlock. An airlock like the one they were passing through now, as the bolts clunked free from its titanium frame and the interim chamber spilled its recycled oxygen into the criminal cornucopia of the Queen’s depot.

And by ‘special favour’, it was understood that Mehmet would give Mahmoud one of the seized ‘offensive weapons’ that he had — against all regulation — been storing in the office evidence locker for just such a moment where he might find himself up against a wall, in dire need of a bargaining chip.

Mahmoud had had his eye on a particular Katana, which he believed to be a World War II antique, and had been dying to get his hands on it to value the thing. Mehmet had been sending him pixelated photos of the sword over the past few months to keep him interested.

“Do you have my baby?” Mahmoud had gushed over the intercom ten minutes earlier when Mehmet’s taxi dropped him at the gate of the secure perimeter. In that moment, Mehmet was put in mind of Eimantas’ wet lips and bright eyes back when he’d spoken with paternal pride about the living tissue of “darlings”.

Now, inside the anteroom of the terminal for black-market oddities and perversities that was The Queen’s Warehouse, next to the metal detectors and surveillance monitor cubicle — with one final airlock between him and all that he’d come here to find — Mehmet unzipped the duffel bag he’d brought with him and passed the guard an ancient sword, in plain view of the security cameras,

Mahmoud drew the Katana from its Saya. The blade let out a tortured hiss as he prized it free, whistling in awe and laying it against his arm. The melanin content of his skin — several shades darker than Mehmet’s — making the metal appear rich and luminescent.

“Wouldn’t have hurt you to oil her, would it?” he asked Mehmet while tapping the pad of his thumb to its blade edge. “She needs nourishment, needs the correct storage temperate so that she doesn’t warp. This is going to be quite the restoration project, oh yes!”

He balanced the thing on the last articulation of his index finger, his reflection splitting in the tarnished metal as he bent in towards it, hot breath from his nostrils misting its surface.

“Don’t worry, it’s disconnected,” Mahmoud said, without turning around, to Mehmet who had been anxiously eyeing the CCTV camera above them.

“So what do I owe you?”

“Just what we agreed,” replied Mehmet, “one hour, full access to the ‘Organics’, ‘Pelts’ and ‘Soft-Tech’ sections.

“No additional charge?” Mahmoud frowned.

“Just the hour.”

“Any idea what a beauty like this is worth? What kind of price I could fetch for her?”

“We both know you’re not planning on selling it.”

“Fair enough,” said Mahmoud, flashing his teeth. “Sure no one will be missing her?”

“Positive. It’s been gathering dust for four years and no one at the office has ever claimed it, so reckon it’s fair game.”

“That so? What kinda fella tried to pass it by you in the first place?”

“The fella was a lady. Props department for a film production company, on her way to a shoot that was happening in Somerset, or so she claimed.”

“Bona fide?”

“Couldn’t tell you. Film might have been a front, or it might have been legit. Either way, I told her an illegal sword’s an illegal sword and that’s the end of it, look up the ‘Offensive Weapons Bill’ if you don’t believe me. She wasn’t happy about it, but what choice did she have?”

“Fair play, fair play,” said Mahmoud, sheathing the Katana, “I wonder how many people were impaled on her or decapitated by her. Maybe a Samurai committed Seppuku on her, or

carved up a conscientious objector. You'd be surprised just how easy it is to take apart a human body," he added, letting them through the perimeter.

Mehmet hadn't known what to say to that.

Now Mahmoud said: "Right, deal's a deal," as they passed through the final interior checkpoint. "Thanks Mahmoud, I appreciate the help."

"Don't mention it, chap," said Mahmoud, with a smile that reached from dimple to eye.

And then he punched the final airlock open.

Chrome tubing cross-hatched the ceiling like exposed entrails.

The transmitter beneath his patch squirmed and Mehmet almost crashed into a shelving unit as his nerves lit up like a fuse blowing. The pain was absolute, as if a message from Selin were burrowing into him. And then the pain was gone. Not a trace, nothing of her to cling to. The agony erased from Mehmet's body as if it had never happened.

Further along and a few rows across was stored the 'Soft-Tech' weaponry — that could wait, Mehmet would make a withdrawal from that section in due course.

He ran the remaining fingers of his right hand along the labelled segments of the burnished aluminium shelving. The case numbers ran into their tens of thousands here. Mehmet had reached H1678 and still had a little while to go.

There had to be shelves here containing skin suits like the ones he and Himari had discovered in the Reefers earlier that day ...

He was arrested by the sight of ivory from young elephants carved into ballerina figurines, a stuffed owl with marbles for eyes, vast clumps of cornflower blue and fuchsia coral in reinforced ziplock bags, a taxidermied crocodile head with the dehydrated body of a piranha petrified mid-air in its jaws, a stuffed bobcat, a stuffed turtle (its tiny mouth snapping at the plastic bag that trapped it) a stuffed duckbill platypus. Staged dioramas wired to pull naturalism out of the suffering of final moments.

And then, onto the human remains.

He passed by all kinds of grisly exhibits. Many of them fetish curiosities that would have been better off in places like the Kunstkamera in St Petersburg or The Pathology Museum in Tokyo. Medicine jars containing the floating, contorted bodies of aborted fetuses with two heads, the malformed faces of children merely months old before they died by the looks of things, conjoined twins affixed at the shoulder, or with too many limbs, hung pickled in milky yellow solutions. Further along the row, Mehmet passed opaque buckets labelled: LEFT BREAST, NECK SKIN, BUTTOCKS and RIGHT THIGH. The surgical light passing through the off-white walls of these containers revealed the grey shadows of the dormant fleshy parts housed within each. More plastic buckets, these ones unlabelled, the ghosts of muscles, ligaments, bones and fat lurking inside cheap plastic. Evidence of transplant tourism seized before they could reach, and be slotted into, their new host bodies.

As Mehmet suspected, a large swathe of the Lithuanian's VIVI-CELL products were missing. 'Akhavan0027 through 'Akhavan0256' had been taken. Or rather, given the bunched arrangement of the products, it was likely that the two-hundred plus items had never even made it to The Queen's Warehouse in the first place. Mehmet was filled with a great bitterness at how screwed the system had become: a disgust at the way his meticulously logged case had been torn

apart and allowed to go to ruin in this way. But this was about more than corruption: Mehmet was growing ever more convinced that the skins were alive which, if true, meant that it was not just laws, but human rights being violated here. The sanctity of living beings were being abused. It was the undoing of humanity.

Mehmet was unsure as to what to do next: if he exposed this raided casefile and others like it, his name and the names of his colleagues were slapped on all their labels ... if he whistled at this stage, there was a high risk Rob would be waving from the mainland as Mehmet went down with the ship.

In the antiseptic glare of the chequerboard tile lighting above Mehmet, the skins of the dismembered and treated body parts had a jaundiced sheen to them. Cloaked as they were in polymer pillowcase-like sacks, the pallor of the reproductive organs had taken on a look at once waxy and sweat-soaked. It now seemed patently absurd that Mehmet could ever have experienced even a glimmer of sexual arousal at one of the sex dolls racked a few shelves up on patinated trays, like corpses in a morgue. He half-expected to see a toe-tag dangling from the glossy feet of the dolls, to see the tell-tale red splotches of post mortem lividity in their backs and behinds as if they had all just had their lights knocked out and their blood were pooling with gravity in the undersides of bodies.

Again, the pull in his left hand, the tug homewards. Not now, he thought, desperately suppressing the urge to commune with her, to tap into the beacon of her live body-feed. He might have been imagining things, but he could have sworn her skin had dropped in temperature by a couple of degrees, as if it were being, right now, regulated by the core temperature of another body in a different country, on a different continent. The transplant flinched and Mehmet's mind was filled with images of some horror — part human organ, part circuitry board

— being birthed from his body. And then he was inside her, zipping along her neurons, crawling through her muscles, travelling up her optic nerves until he could see a man lounging in a battered Chesterton leather chair, cigar pursed between wet lips. There was an antique globe in the corner, a pop art canvas of Marilyn Monroe blowing pink bubble-gum hanging, unframed from a nail on the wall above an aged bronze and mahogany gramophone which was playing Ella Fitzgerald and Louis Armstrong.

*Things have come to a pretty pass
Our romance is growing flat,
For you like this and the other
While I go for this and that,
Goodness knows what the end will be
Oh I don't know where I'm at
It looks as if we two will never be one
Something must be done:*

The words careened through the cedar loft, the accompanying chirpy melody encircling the man on the Chesterton. Mehmet still couldn't make out his face behind the cloud of cigar smoke that hung about him.

*You say either and I say either,
You say neither and I say neither
Either, either Neither, neither
Let's call the whole thing off.*

“Good, good,” the man in the smoke spoke with an accent that was strangely familiar. Mehmet felt two hands placed on Selin’s hips from behind her as the American said, “Measure her again.”

And then the connection severed.

Mehmet walked on, passing sacks of what he had first taken to be hair ties, but which upon closer inspection were revealed to be baggies of circumcised flesh. He was put in mind of the biblical story Rob had once told him during his lunch break about David making a tent out of the foreskins of two-hundred murdered Philistines. It had been almost impossible for Mehmet to finish his baloney sandwich after hearing that. Where had David found the time, Mehmet had wondered back then, binning the cured meat. How had he sewn that tent together and were two-hundred foreskins really sufficient? And what were you supposed to do with a piece of camping equipment like that once you’d made it?

The vision of Selin must have been a hallucination, she was still in Eastern Europe, wasn’t she? That was where her train had been passing through, wasn’t it? Her, with her mother beside her in the darkness. He decided that as soon as he could, he would call her uncle at his internet café and try again to establish contact. The chip was malfunctioning, that was all. Something had gone wrong with its wiring, or the port tapped into his nerves. The tech had projected simulations of his worst paranoias. It hadn’t been Selin. It couldn’t have been.

This is unhinged, Mehmet thought. But, there was a part of him that was becoming increasingly reassured by all this distortion and depravity. Perhaps he was becoming increasingly soothed by the familiarity of all this unnaturalness. He wasn’t sure he could live a life of normality, nor really if he knew what a life of normality might look like.

Some of the shelves were so high up that wheeled ladders, bracketed to a pole that ran the length of each rack, had to be used to access the lofty recesses of the hanger. There was something reverential, almost religious about the deathly silence, the dustless awe that clung to every bagged oddity that put him in mind of a mosque. There was something fundamentally repressive and domineering about this place of worship containing all the strangest artefacts that humanity could create, break, modify, steal and amass ranking the walls of its corridors. Mehmet walked on, painfully aware of his own breathing and footfalls in the conditioned air.

A handful of flies circled certain packages. Mehmet batted them away with the back of his hand, trying not to think about what in particular they must have been feeding on.

Now he moved onto 'Inks', the section of tattooed flesh which bridged the storage sections of 'Organics' and 'Soft-Tech'. Here, rather than exposed shelving, there were long, narrow draws like those used for developing photos in a dark room or storing sugar paper in a craft shop. The draws, too, were dustless and recently oiled. One by one, Mehmet drew them open soundlessly.

He had no case or file number to work off of and so was reduced to sorting through the storage compartments at random, relying entirely upon blind luck and instinct as the window of time Mahmoud had afforded him rapidly vanished. All Mehmet knew was that he would recognise the pieces of skin when he saw them. It was all he had.

Towards the end of the aisle marked 'Inks', Mehmet hit gold.

And just at that moment, it happened.

The chip blazed. Suddenly so hot Mehmet could smell himself cooking from within. The rectangle of keloid scarring that separated his lifeline from hers turned from white to purple as he

fell to the pebble-effect linoleum tiles, clutching it to his chest. As the frenzy beneath his dermis intensified, as the part of Selin tried to tear itself free from his body, Mehmet travelled back to the room with the Chesterton.

*You like potato and I like potahto
You like tomato and I like tomahto
Potato, potahto, Tomato, tomahto.
Let's call the whole thing off*

“Get the inside of her thigh,” the American was saying, and whoever had been lurking behind Selin dropped to one knee and passed the ribbon of a soft tape measure around the circumference of her upper leg. A woman’s voice read out the measurement to the closest millimetre and the faceless man typed the number into the iPad resting on his knee. Selin was shivering, massaging the square of Mehmet’s skin to calm herself.

Why couldn’t he hear her thoughts? Ever since the malfunction, Mehmet had been able to read only the sensations of Selin’s body, but none of the interiority of her mind. At once he felt both connected to her and a void of intimacy, as if he were trapped inside an empty vessel. Where was the gorgeous, complex cascade of Selin’s thoughts and emotions he knew so well? They were missing. Something had gone deeply wrong and now the most integral part of their bond was absent. It felt more messed up than Mehmet knew how to describe, as if a fundamental law of nature had been violated.

Again, the tape passed around her leg, lower down this time. Another read-out, another piece of data entered into the iPad. The prodding fingers were ice against her body. The faded

tan leather creaked as the man shifted his weight forwards. Lower went the tape. Numbers read, numbers recorded, another measurement taken. This repeated itself until the cold fingers finally pinned the ribbon to Selin's ankle and read out the last stat.

*But oh, if we call the whole thing off
Then we must part
And oh, if we ever part, then that might break my heart*

"I must compliment you on your skin, my darling, it really is quite gorgeous, quite flawless. And the colour ... like honey," the American drawled, sending ripples and eddies passing through the cloud in the wake of his words, before adding:

"I simply can't wait to see it ruined."

*So if you like pyjamas and I like pyjahmas,
I'll wear pyjamas and give up pyajahmas
For we know we need each other so we
Better call the whole thing off
Let's call the whole thing off.*

*So if I go for scallops and you go for lobsters,
So all right no contest we'll order lobseter
For we know we need each other so we
Better call the calling off off,
Let's call the whole thing off.*

The American tapped a cylindrical inch of ash from the cigar onto a cut crystal ash tray balanced on the armrest of the Chesterton. Smoke parted like curtains before him as he stood abruptly, and Mehmet saw at last why his voice had sounded so familiar.

The man, of course, was Jean Gibson.

His peroxide mop of hair had been oiled and tousled so that it now resembled the wig of a carnival performer. A bright pink paisley pocket square shot out from the breast of his jacket lapel. Mehmet hated that, even in that disturbed moment, there was something fantastically theatrical about him, something fundamentally entertaining and electric. Although, above the cruel slash of Jean's nose, there was nothing funny or entertaining about his eyes, which were as cold and as hard as precious stones that had been hammered into his skull.

Then the legislator smiled and Mehmet could have sworn that, in that moment, Jean was looking straight through Selin at him, into The Queen's Warehouse, his stare drilling holes through Mehmet's very being. It was a smile of merciless ambition and forbidden knowledge.

Gibson smiled wider still. Looking into his mouth was like looking inside a bone that had just been split open.

Just as quickly as it arrived, the pain in Mehmet's hand was gone, and with it the transmission. The temperature of the derm-chip dropped back down in a matter of seconds and deep inside Mehmet's hand, something clicked.

The skin-radio had turned itself off.

Mehmet was left staring at a dried sheet of brown skin with a portion of a painting stained onto its surface.

Beneath the painting, Mehmet could still make out the papillary ridges of former flesh, the idiosyncrasies of dermal channels like the woven fibres of a piece of sailcloth. This had been part of someone. Perhaps recently.

At first, Mehmet couldn't make out what it was a painting of. It was smudged and frenzied — an orgy of linework and blotched colours — as if the original had been completed largely in finger-smears rather than brushstrokes. He could discern a mottled beige mass cruelly intersected with indigo strokes and then a harsh line of white emanating from the tangle.

Then he took a step back and saw it was of a hand, set against a dark background. A gnarled hand holding a knife.

The piece, though he had never seen it before, was all at once sickeningly familiar. It was so visceral, that the fresh horror with Gibson fell out of Mehmet's mind for a few minutes as the art conjured up a particular farmhouse in the North of France.

It was another piece of the same painting. He couldn't say what the whole painting was off, precisely, but there was something in the foreboding it instilled in him that made Mehmet certain, without a shadow of a doubt, that it was the very same one Thi had seen a segment of carved into the back of the woman she saw from under her blindfold. Thi who, likely as not, had another portion of that self-same painting inked onto and carved from her own back.

The other sheets in the draw were all in the same style. The corner of a bucket. The snout of a large dog, its tongue lolling out. The taut muscles of a man's abdomen, his bellybutton a purple hole in his skin that had been inked onto the skin of another. Flesh on flesh. The neck of a violin. The hooves of a goat barely visible in a thrash of ebony ink-marks. Mehmet remembered the head that Thi had described to them — the twisted horns and animal ears sprouting from a

human head above a bright red maw gaping between/amidst a dark beard — and he realised that the painting depicted a creature from ancient Greek mythology: the satyr.

A dread moment ensued, woven with wonderment.

Someone was commissioning this painting one tile at a time. Piece by piece, a human canvas was being created; a different skin colour for a different shade of background.

There was no way for him to know how far along the production of the thing was, how close to completion the monstrous tapestry might be.

But there was one thing Mehmet *did* know, as he thumbed through sheaf after sheaf of inked anthropoid leather, turning the beautiful horror of each over and over in his hands.

He knew who had commissioned the artwork.

He knew who the collector was.

Chapter 8: Elsa

She was dressed like a large, golden vagina.

Somehow Mehmet had known Elsa Lustrine would be on as he'd sat down in the dark of his living room to wait the drone out.

It was as if the UK's hottest, and most controversial, pop-culture sensation had been waiting for him, waiting to address Mehmet personally, to serenade him through the crackling static of his television set as if she were looking directly into his damp, Victorian living room. She had eyes for him and him alone on his stained Homebase couch. There was nothing but them in the room. No external influences, no other presenters but her, no other spectators but him.

Lately, things had been linking up in curious and disturbing ways.

Her outfit ... the gold silk of the pantsuit caressed her figure, coated and bathed her as if in honey. The folds on the legs of the pantsuit — which formed the brilliant lips of the costume's labia — were more iridescent than sun rays breaking apart dusk clouds. It seemed, to Mehmet, as if she were being kissed and licked by angels.

A perverted deity, marked and scarred by all the parts of her that she'd already auctioned off: defined by the absence of areas that had been surgically carved out of her.

Mehmet hadn't quite been able to place what was wrong with Elsa when the screen had first zapped into life. His initial impression had been of something missing, the way you have a sense that there are pieces of a jigsaw puzzle that have already been waylaid even before you've completed it. Except here, there were actual, genuine pieces of Elsa missing; fleshy pieces of the puzzle that had been slotted out and carted away.

Beneath the liquid light of her costume, her right breast was visibly diminished, whilst her left shoulder was noticeably lower than the other. The skin of her back left calf was puckered from where a wedge of her epidermis had been extracted and the surface forced to re-join across the exposed gap. The skin on her collarbone looked to be similarly cinched tight to veil another hole in her diminished exterior, riddled as it was with tender-looking scar tissue arranged like lilac ley-lines. One of her cheekbones was latticed with dark stitches, the end where the sewing had been tied off poking out from beneath her bronzer, foundation and blusher. There was a dip in the centre of her forehead, too, as if someone had partially knocked the skull in with the round end of a hammer.

She pranced, defiant in spite of a distinctive limp, thrusting her stunning presence out onto the main stage with a gesture halfway between a stumble and a magician's flourish. Mehmet couldn't decide if he found her beautiful in spite of her disfigurements, or *because* of them. Either way, the infamous style guru was holding every aspect of Mehmet's being captive.

Elsa's beauty was undeniable. Auburn hair like an inverted flame, careless freckles, an up-turned pixie nose — most likely the result of some subtle surgery that employed the 10% beauty improvement metric of an app like FaceTune — and regal, tanned, shoulders gave her a timeless look. Her age, if Mehmet were to guess, could have fallen anywhere between late thirties and early sixties.

“We've got a wonderful show lined up for you on *Le Lust Show*, Mesdames et Messieurs,” Elsa was saying in an imitation Parisian accent so bad, Mehmet wondered if she'd ever met a French person.

It was an inflection so pronounced, so caricatured that he half expected the audience to burst out laughing, but as the camera panned across them, he saw nothing but rapture reflected back from the standing ovation.

“Later on,” Elsa continued, “we’ll be joined by none other than the mouth-watering avant-garde, haute couture designer maestro extraordinaire Doug Hitch! Ouiiii, ouiii mes enfants! And he will be debuting his new fleshy runway extravaganza for your eyes only!”

A clamour of appreciation.

“Quite right, mes enfants, quite right. After that, an incredibly special guest who’s very dear to my heart and has, in fact, been one of my biggest inspirations for this here variety show. Oh but, mes enfants, I’ve said too much — we’ll be getting to the meat of that later.

“I’d like to talk to you, if I may, about what I’m wearing for you ce soir. You might recognise it from Vivienne Westwood’s Georgia O’Keefe-inspired Spring Collection ‘Gesamtkunstwerk’, which I’m definitely pronouncing wrong. Any Germans in ce soir? OK, some, oh a few of you. Good, good, well willkommen. I need to ask you: Gesamtkunstwerk, is it as naughty in German as it sounds in English? Something I’d find in one of your sex dungeons, perhaps?”

As if reading Mehmet’s mind, Elsa said: “In fact, big metallic pussy was the effect I was going for. I’m a yonic lily, as it happens. For those of you who aren’t in the know, this is a gold pantsuit with tulle layering on the legs to give it that oh-so distinctive shape you just can’t keep your eyes off of. Besides the pleated fringes and cap sleeves, my headdress is made up of eagle feathers dipped in real gold. I’ve never wanted to hug myself this much; the feel of the silk on

my bare skin is practically orgasmic, mes enfants. In fact, I'm of the mind to touch myself right here on the stage, in front of all you sexy strangers and make myself cum!"

Mehmet tensed.

"What do you say, mes enfants? Shall we bring out my first guest?"

A roar from the crowd.

Elsa opened her arms.

Mehmet had drawn close to a full pint of blood from his arm with the needle he'd stolen from a work drug test kit, some two hours previous.

He had decanted the plasma — so thick and dark that it hardly seemed plausible the stuff could have come from his own body, resembling as it did the dyed corn syrup hurled about in slasher flicks — into a measuring jug. Snapping on a pair of lurid Marigolds, Mehmet had set about smearing his own lifeforce over the surfaces of objects a certain distance from his house to create a sort of containment perimeter. Blood plastered down the trunks of elm and field maple, blood doled out across the panels of the clapboard fence, blood on the already red Royal Mail letter box. Blood on the telegraph poles and streaked across the mauve brick wall bordering the back alley which led down behind the attached housing to some rotted bike sheds. Blood on the compost bin Mehmet had placed out on the curb for collection the following morning and, lastly, the dregs of the blood soaked in rags and scattered over his small cube of front lawn, some even landing in the driveway and garden of his neighbour — nosy, racist Pat be damned!

Congeaed blood cloaked his Marigolds.

After Mehmet had peeled them off and dropped them into a black bin-liner, he set about attacking the dark flecks that had sprayed past the gloves and now matted his arm hair. A metal scouring pad and diluted bleach solution finally did the trick, though it left his skin raw and smarting.

Mehmet's mind was cluttered with images of every terrible thing that could be happening to Selin in that moment. Everything Gibson could be doing or having done to her body. To do away with the jumble of fury, sorrow and helplessness that met these imaginings and engulfed him, Mehmet mapped out what he'd do with the drone if he managed to catch it: how he'd fry its circuitry with the 50,000 volts discharged from the projectile barb of his taser, now teetering on the knee of his jeans. After that, he'd take that thing to town with an iron wrench, one blow at a time, starting with its hellish, meaty stinger.

He refocused on his surrounds.

Behind the murky glass of the telly, Doug Hitch was wearing a tartan three-piece suit paired with a snakeskin bow tie. Disinterestedly, he played with his frosted mullet. His bronze eye contacts glittered, dancing under the blaze of rigged lighting. He was all angled eyebrows, pinched lips and shimmering piercings.

Now Elsa's guest was sucking in his cheeks, twirling the bull's ring in his septum between thumb and forefinger and saying, "The day someone predicts what I do next is the day I hang myself.

“If what I make doesn’t piss you off,” he continued, “then I’m not doing my job properly. If I don’t make you cry or faint or storm out in anger, then I’ve failed you, and I’m sorry for that.”

Though his words implied bitterness, absurdly Doug kept his tone light and carefree.

Mehmet drifted in and out of the room, of reality, of the scene. Every part of him hurt; his chin and hands were still busted up from his fall on the docks, the puncture wound from the drone throbbed in his back and Selin’s skin was still burnt on the outside from his lighter and on the inside from when it had overheated. But mostly he was tired. Tired of things not making sense. Tired of worrying about his lover. Tired of the sheer madness of life.

Above all, Mehmet was tired of being tired.

“So, are the rumours true, mon cheri?” Elsa warbled. “Are you back on the party powder?”

Doug’s contact lenses flashed dangerously.

But then Elsa’s guest stood and pulled a baggie of powder from his pocket and waggled it at the audience, who cheered. He did it as if it were the most natural thing on earth.

Mehmet disassociated.

“... one-part fashion designer, two-parts mythic.”

Elsa ran a hand over her headdress. A pantomime of flirtation.

“My little devil,” she trilled.

Again, Mehmet patched out of the room.

“Exactly! I wanted to create something which didn’t exist, or which had never existed in the way you’re about to see it. I wanted to show the ways in which technology imprints itself upon our skin and the reciprocal manner by which we, in turn, meld the fabric of our bodies to suit the mechanised and the virtual.”

A grin fell across Doug’s face like a landslide.

Mehmet faded in and out as if someone were playing with the dimmer switch of his brain.

“Mediocrity is the scourge of the earth.”

“You’re touched by fire, my love, oh you are, mais ouiii, mais ouiii!”

“Lèche-bottes.”

Out and in.

“And do you deny the accusations levelled at you that fashion designers these days are just a bunch of spoilt kids with access to unlimited narcotics and the world’s largest props cupboard?”

“Do pigs fly? We might be spoiled, but we have the interests of everyone at heart — all colours, classes and creeds — people crave self-expression and that’s what we’re here to do. Not to sell tickets, but to show you all the possible versions of what you could one day become, and especially the versions of yourselves that you haven’t even had to chance to discover yet. People need to know I’m not some swanky hot-shot with a rod up my arse. I built my brand from the ground up. I was so poor when I started out ... I was living off of dole money and my mum’s shepherd’s pie. I made dresses out of bin liners, dresses out of curtains, dresses out of carpets and

clingfilm. Give me five-hundred bob and I'll make you three-hundred original outfits. The glitz and glam is immaterial, so to speak."

"But why should we listen to you? What do *you* have to say that we haven't already heard? How are *you* personally going to change the world?"

"Well why don't you wait and see — decide for yourselves! I think I'll let my show speak for me, Elsa."

"Ah you filthy scoundrel! Isn't he such a tease, Mesdames et Messieurs?"

Cheering and hollering from the audience.

"The world's mutating," Doug continued, unflappable, "so why not mutate with it? Long live the freaks, long live the punks! All's fair in love and Dior."

"Ahhh Dougie darling, you have such a way with words. Well, there you have it, Mesdames et Messieurs!"

A percussion of claps.

"Very soon," she continued, "very soon, we'll be revealing our head-liner guest, mes enfants, but first ... you have guessed it! It's that time already! It's time for the Body Lotteryyyyyyyyyy!!!"

Nothing could have prepared Mehmet for what came next.

The stagehand wheeled out an old-school slot machine. Carved across the arched top of it in studded LED lights were the words: *JACKPOT!!!* and beneath that: *LUST SLOTS!!!*

“You all know the rules,” Elsa crooned. “My first guest, in this case the esteemed Doug Hitch himself, will draw the slot” — here, her assistant made a grand gesture in the direction of a chrome level with a red vinyl nob on the end of it attached to the machine — “and he will keep drawing until three images on the single slot panel line up. Last week it was a nipple, but this time it could be anything: part of my back, legs, arms, a piece of my arse, a small section of my face.” Here she tapped at the dent in her forehead with a golden glittered talon, “my belly, my foot, or, indeed, my last remaining nipple!

“Once the body part is selected, you have until the end of the ninety-minute show to bid for it, mes enfants in the audience, by going on my site.”

Here, a web link was projected onto the plush red velvet curtains behind Elsa in neon gold.

“And then, the highest bidder will get that piece of me after my live surgery either transplanted onto you, or preserved in a special case to take home! As for my other enfants watching from your TVs,” here Elsa looked at — no *into* — Mehmet with eyes as old as time, “bad luck and hopefully see you very soon!”

He shivered and rubbed his arms, though it wasn’t cold.

Screams of, “We love you Elsa!”, “I want to wear you, Elsa!” and “Be mine, forever!” hurtled from the spectators like the mating calls of coyotes. Mehmet became aware that Elsa’s audience — which until that point he’d thought to be predominantly sleazy men — was at least half female.

Doug Hitch stood and, executing a mock-curtsey, proceeded upstage to plant himself beside the antique contraption.

His bronze contact lenses flickered dementedly as he paused for dramatic effect ... and jammed the level downwards.

Childish cartoon mimicries of body parts whizzed by in dismembered blurs of cotton-candy pink.

The slot stopped spinning on an action-comic style rendition of a buttocks and two pouting faces.

“Ooh, sooooo close,” Elsa cooed, tapping at her lips and cheeks to see if they were still there and feigning relief at the discovery that her face was — at least for now — still intact.

She giggled obscenely.

“Go again my little devil,” Elsa burred and Doug, with an obliging smile that revealed the extra bronze of his grill, put his shoulder behind the gleaming switch and gave it a push.

An illustration of a thigh, following by a breast and a bicep.

“One more try, mon cheri!”

Round and round the floating body tiles whirled, cartwheeling sickeningly against the vintage pound coin, *INSERT MONEY HERE* and *PLAY, PLAY, PLAY!!!* décor embossed on the tin panels of the machine. Round and round went the vignettes of flesh as the runners of LED lights contouring them strobed purple and red.

Two cartoons of a back and shoulders, seen from behind, and one cartoon close-up of a foot.

“No dice,” said Doug, shrugging. He ran a finger along the nautical markings tattooed into the skin visible beneath the shaved sides of his mullet.

“One more, mon cheri, just for luck! What do you say, mes enfants? Are you feeling lucky?”

Catcalling, feverish screaming and the drumming of hands thundering on the backs of stadium seats met her provocation.

Finally, Doug hit the jackpot.

Three drawings of perfect buttocks lined up neatly, the camera zooming in on them to rapturous applause, so that each one appeared to be mooning Mehmet.

WINNER! WINNER! WINNER! flashed in projected florescence on the curtains, to the accompanied sound effects of a claxon and the trilling of cash registers.

“The Lust Slots have spoken, mes enfants,” Elsa proclaimed, spanking her derriere to further laudation.

“Happy bidding! Et souvenez-vous above all ... to make me riiiiich!!”

Mehmet muted the TV.

Picking up the taser from where it had slipped from his jeans to the sofa cushion, he padded over to the window.

Beyond the streetlamps, perfectly manicured hedges, neat gravel driveways and raised, box flowerbeds sprouting sunflowers and geraniums, he saw nothing, no flashes of a bloodthirsty, cyborg hummingbird in flight.

No tell-tale buzzing.

No hybrid assassin.

So, Mehmet did what any Brit would do when shit was about to hit the fan: he made some tea.

Onto the heat element of the stovetop went a teapot set of two parts, the bottom containing water, the top, loose Çaykur black tea leaves from the Eastern Black Sea region of Turkey — the best he'd been able to find on this sorry island.

After the water in the lower compartment had boiled, Mehmet took it off the element and waited ten seconds before pouring enough for several glasses into the top section, over the two heaped tablespoons of leaves that had been stewing there, before putting both layers back on the heat.

As he waited the twenty-five minutes for the tea to bubble and infuse, he got out a single, Turkish, slim-waisted and thin-finished glass, known as an 'ince belli', which he filled part-way up with plain hot water to warm the glass through. He paired it with a matching glass tea plate and sat back down in front of the tragedy of errors that was *Le Lust Show*.

The tea set was a present he'd received in the post from Selin — the individual glass pieces meticulously wrapped in newspaper and crate paper and tied up with raffia — and marked the last direct exchange of communication between them before she'd fled her home with her mother. After that, Mehmet found himself without an address or number for either of them, forced to rely on the transplant and the transplant alone for contact.

His vision of Selin from The Queen's Warehouse spun round his mind on an unending reel.

Where was she? It was impossible that she could have gotten into the UK so fast. But the patching simulation had felt so real. Mehmet might not have believed it if he'd merely seen what

had happened to her, but he had *felt* everything, had smelt Gibson's acrid cigar smoke and experienced the cold bands of the tape coiled round Selin's body as her shape was prodded, measured and documented. Had Gibson found her in The Jungle, perhaps? It didn't seem likely that she'd already reached France. Had Gibson, then, flown to the Eastern Bloc — where Mehmet suspected Selin and her mother had been when they'd seen the woman with the birth mark in the shape of Madagascar — and poached them? Was Gibson, even now, collecting vulnerable women and turning them into artefacts? Lastly, the worst thought of all occurred to him: was Gibson having her measured for clothes to dress her in, or was it Selin's body itself that was being made *into* clothing?

The twenty-five minutes were up. Mehmet, reassured that the leaves had sunk to the bottom of the top pot indicating that the tea was ready, tipped out the water he had been warming the glass with and replaced it with the beautiful, deep red of the bitter Çay. The molten ruby hue of it never ceased to fill him with a childish joy. And something else, a deep longing, a pull homeward ...

In this tea, Mehmet felt tethered to both cultures, to the astringent elegance of Turkey and the fussy obsession with orderliness of the British and their quintessential desire to always have a 'cuppa' in hand. It wasn't often that Mehmet felt moored to either his home or adopted country, and even rarer still when he felt bound to both.

Tea did that, for him. Tea and only tea.

He was out of brown sugar to sweeten it with, as was custom, and had no Borek, black olives or aged feta to accompany the drink, but this one cultural anchor-point remained his, at least. Mehmet sipped the bitter brew, lifting the fluted glass in salutation to the room in open

defiance of its austere, oppressive Victorian décor that his landlord had refused to let him change.

Back on screen, beneath a film of dust and cigarette grease, Doug's runway had begun.

Mehmet watched, his tea forgotten, as the models caught fire.

Chapter 9: Runway

They rocked from heel to heel, flames splashing along their silhouettes.

They came forward in single file, heads liting with each faltering stride. More poured out from behind, footfalls punctuated by drumbeats. Their feet come into focus first, sandals and zoris, neats and stilettos, spool heels and stomper boots.

Flames bloomed, their blue-orange tongues climbing as more gas was fed into the sconces lining the catwalk.

The first model had a plunging herringbone collar that neatly clove his silver admiral's jacket. A large steel choker bound his neck, wrought so that it resembled a burnished section of a snake's ribcage. His dress was cut from a filigree-like wire wool and had been painfully twined about his skin so that Mehmet couldn't tell if the clothing sprouted from his flesh, or if his flesh had grown around the wire the way a tree might re-arrange its bark about a cable tie.

The next model carried an ombré box dress fashioned to look like overlapping copper plates, jewels where the rivets would have been. Her head was transformed by an elaborate headdress spewing piping arranged like crinkled sun rays which appeared to have been papier-mâché-ed with a pink derma layer of some sort. Gold paint leaked from her mouth and ran down her neck. The next model sported a unitard. Circles of material cut away to expose her breasts — one left bare, the other attached to some sort of cruel pump affixed via rubber tubing to a cylinder that wasn't so much strapped to her back as growing out of it.

After her, an emaciated man in chainmail, tortured with paint splatters. A gas mask with the eye glass poked out, his exposed derma branded with the giddy pattern of microcircuitry.

Another. An exoskeleton corset, arms twined with barbed wire sprouting ripe berries, her skirt beaten into knife pleats. Skin the same shade as Selin's.

They drew forth in legions, eyes fixed on unseen points, legs crossing hypnotically, their march somehow both mercurial and static.

Yet more models breached the backstage gloam, revealing mangled cyborg looks, each one more outlandish than the last.

Spearheading the scene was a woman walking in a giant bird cage, holes cut through the bottom for her legs. She wore nothing but a spongy-textured seersucker bra and knickers the same colour as her skin. She clawed and thrashed against the bars, but could not break them. As she advanced towards the camera, Mehmet realised that some of the cage bars had been bored through her body, passing through her shoulders and stomach at angles that surely would have penetrated all her vital organs. As she did a lilting U-turn, Mehmet saw that the exit wounds were as impossibly bloodless as the entry wounds had been.

Next, a duster and chastity belt, a dirndl skirt, garters and a silkscreen sack cloth top inked with fractured scenes from a Renaissance painting. The artwork depicted an upside-down man being flayed alive. The skinned individual was surrounded by naked surgeons, a horned man, fretful dogs and an agonised violinist which Mehmet knew, instinctively, to be the exact same painting that was being collected one piece at a time in The Queen's Warehouse.

Mehmet bent for a sip of tea, just for something to root him in the present, but the Çay was stone cold.

He set the glass and saucer aside in disgust.

There followed a model with epaulettes carved to resemble eagle talons piercing through her latex, lettuce-hem dress, tears of rust running down her ghostly white face. One model walked with a Perspex cube framed around his abdomen. The cube was filled with Technicolor butterflies that beat frantically against the young man's bare belly. More and more of the insects filled the cube, impossibly growing in quantity as if they were fluttering free from pupae in his bellybutton.

The flames rose higher.

Unseen at first, a series of programmed robotic arms swung into play. Their extremities coated in a pastel fabric of various fleshy shades. Some of the robots resembled dismembered limbs, some of them looked like sexual organs, others sported the severed heads of waxy humanoids.

Mehmet choked. They were the Lithuanian's mechanoid sex-derms, sliced up and affixed to the hydraulic pistons of the robots.

The VIVI-CELL parts swung to the drumbeats, the contorted articulations of penis and elbow and collagen-pumped lips synchronising with the other dancing appendages.

Were they still alive, Mehmet wondered, wracked with nausea. Could those parts still feel all of this? He no longer felt awe at the ingenuity of the Vilnius anatomy professor's creations, only a searing, subcutaneous dread.

The camera panned over to the audience who stood stock still, pinned in the blackness.

Cast in the flickering light of the propane flames, the models and flesh-bots pulsed, gleaming like oil-slicked waters. The bots moved as humans and the humans as automatons,

hissing and stomping their feet. A war party, a savage melding of sapiens and machines, Mehmet thought as a great, wet sob rose in his throat.

Arcing away, one-by-one the models turned back up the runway to disappear into the left wing of the stage — even as more flowed out of the right wing to replace them at the start of the U-shaped circuit — flames pooling in the exposed sections of their buttocks and the smalls of their backs, pierced and burnt and tattooed and carved up as they were. As each reached the velvet lip of the runway, the cyber men and women's eyes sparkled bronze, brass, silver, copper, gold. Flames caught in their sockets and struck the glitter-dusted hoods of their eyelids, before they doubled back.

The robots packed themselves up: thigh, arse and vagina corkscrewing back down into their hatches. The final model appeared on the runway and gradually the necklace of bodies slunk away through the veiled exit until the stage was bare.

Twisting, the flames rose even higher, blossoming in impossible colours.

Reams of black cloth all around the room were drawn back to display concealed mirrors. The flames dashed against them, catching there and breaking into pieces. The fire leapt in a frenzy and everything split. Flung from one surface to another, the spectators' reflected bodies, suddenly yanked out of the darkness, dissolved, dancing wildly across the silver panels.

The audience shrieked, whether from excitement or terror, Mehmet could not tell.

Through a trick of the mirrors, the audience appeared to catch fire, shrinking as they melted.

Mehmet watched in dismay as the stage, slot machine and fashion host burned to cinders.

The last few weeks had changed Mehmet, gradually, imperceptibly, by increments so slight even he hadn't felt them occurring. But now, all of a sudden, he wished he could recant his blasphemous actions on the Dover cliff-face; the lip of the void over which he'd shouted and renounced Allah.

Mehmet had purchased a dozen evil eyes to ward off any vengeful spirits, hanging the glass medallions from nails in the walls of every room so that he was surveyed wherever he was, and even going so far as to re-pave his doorstep and setting one evil eye into the fresh cement between the terracotta tiles, as was custom. But it still wasn't enough. The forces of evil were closing in on him: he felt them.

A future without divine providence filled Mehmet with abject misery.

To right the wrong, Mehmet unlocked his front door and, grabbing his hardly thumbed Quran from the Ikea bookshelf passed over the threshold into the night with the holy text balanced atop his head as his mother had taught him — the drone be damned. As he crossed, he recited the prophet's prayers in the form of two familiar duas:

“I depart with Allah's name, relying on Him. It is Allah who saves us from sins with His guidance.”

And then Mehmet turned to the sky, tinted orange with light pollution, and recited the second dua:

“O Allah, I seek refuge in You from misleading or being misled or oppressing or being oppressed or from being ignorant or bearing the result of ignorance.”

His proclamation fulfilled, Mehmet felt Satan leave him in that instant, and turned back indoors. He would wait out the drone all night, if he had to.

Back inside, Elsa, displaced and pixelated by the interference of Mehmet's poor satellite connection — though very much still alive and not at all burnt to ash — was taunting the audience:

“Who could it be, mes enfants? Have you guessed? He's been causing quite the stir, challenging so-called “bio-ethics” in the name of art. He's my personal hero, Mesdames et Messieurs, and a dear friend! Mon Dieu! My final guest of the night before my live surgery — stay tuned!” Here, a surreptitious wink at the camera. “It couldn't be ... the one and only ... give it up for the ambassador of skin artists the world over ... iiiiiiiiiiit's ... Jeeeeean Gibsoooooon!!!”

Mehmet spun the iron wrench about in his hands.

Still no drone.

Would the blood work? He had nothing but Mac's word to go on. That and his own refugee instinct to survive at all cost.

The legislator's blonde sponge of hair was as frenetic as ever, his mouth peeling open like a septic wound.

The whooping, this time, was peppered with booing.

“Folks,” Jean said, his voice as sickening as syrup, “you know I speak my mind, you know I speak plain and direct. I've had my fair share of fighting to have my voice heard over the

last few years, to shake things up a bit and even here, it sounds like, there are those amongst you who are going to require some convincing.

“Folks, I’m here, in partnership with your gracious — and most sensual, may I add — hostess extraordinaire to extend an invitation to an exclusive, one-of-a-kind era-defining launch, an inauguration, if you will, though ... a tad illegal currently. Details will be posted across my social media accounts, if you follow me, of the chance to dive under the skin of the most taboo corners of our art industry.

“As the Prince of Light, Jesus Christ is my witness, what Elsa and I are planning is going to make history! Oh, yes it sure is, folks!

Over the last decade, the British Broadcasting Corporation had eased off almost every single one of their censorship laws in a bid to salvage the mass-exodus of viewers who were leaving the six BBC channels — to which they had been loyal for generations — in favour of streaming platforms with juicier, less restricted and monitored content. In response, the BBC had allowed for all product placement, self-promotion, obscenities, violence, gratuitous sex, misinformation and fake news to exist across all their programmes regardless of the time-slot. Their only bid to cover their backs came in the form of a disclaimer at the start of every emission: *The views hereby enclosed in the following broadcast do not reflect the opinion of the producers, studio or network which has ...*

Mehmet knocked back the cold, acrid black tea. The displeasure of having let the expensive brew spoil, of having butchered a sacred rite, perversely offered him a strange respite from Jean’s madness.

Under such lax BBC censorship, in the wake of the controversial ‘Content Wars’, Elsa Lustrine’s ‘Le Lust Show’ had burgeoned, each episode clawing in an additional million viewers. The more graphic, irreverent and hedonistic her programme, the greater the spike in ratings.

“But first, folks, a story. Now, before you go ahead and doze off in your seats, y’all, this one’s a doozy and, cross my heart, I’ll try to keep it short and sweet, folks, I really will!

“So, some of you may or may not be aware of a woman by the name of Henrietta Lacks. Any of you? OK, OK, some of you, fine. Well, for those of you who haven’t, Henrietta was an African American living in Baltimore, who, in 1951 had cells collected from her malignant tumour without her knowledge or consent.

“Lacks died soon afterwards, folks, but her cells out-lived her, doubling in growth every twenty-four hours. The ‘HeLa’ cells, as they became known — and please forgive me the history lesson here — led to two Nobel Prizes for research, helped in the development of cancer treatments, in-vitro fertilisation and vaccines. They have been employed in the research of toxins, viruses, hormones and radiation treatment.

“Henrietta’s cells went on to fuel a multi-billion dollar bio-tech industry, folks!

“Now, don’t fret ladies and gentlemen, you’ll see how this all ties-in to the fashion industry in just a moment. Oh Lord, you shall!

“So listen, whilst it’s undeniably regretful that John Hopkins Hospital, who took the cells, are only now starting to compensate Lacks’ descendants, this case raises the interesting conundrum of who really owns our bodies when we pass, does it not, folks?

“Henrietta — and I’m sure there are those of you who might quibble about the racial aspect of this case and the institutional abuse of a vulnerable person of colour yadda, yadda — did not die in vain.

“Her body served a purpose. It facilitated the advancements in modern medicine as we know it today and saved the lives of countless millions. So, a job well-done, but suppose we afforded the same ethical value to the role played by the human body in art, design and spectacle, which save lives in an altogether different way?

“Are not those equally valid pursuits, folks? We should re-purpose the body, recycle our mortal coil, further our aesthetic values through surgery, augmentation and display.

“I am trying to honour here the art of the dead, of ‘Necro-Techneis’ to coin a phrase, folks. To not let our dead fether away, but to transform and transmogrify, to immortalise the legacies of the formally living, as much as the Egyptians did for their entombed Pharaohs; just as the Torajan people of Indonesia let the bodies of their relatives ‘live’ with them for years after they’ve passed; look no further than the mummies of the Mayans and Incas; take a moment to reflect on the sky burials of the Tibbetan Buddhists; think on the South Koreans who turn the ashes of their dead into beads; or how the Varanasi Indians dress their dead up in colours that celebrate their greatest virtues; even consider how, in more recent history, the Soviets embalmed Lenin and the reverence with which he has been showcased in a glass exhibit casing for the last hundred years, halfway between a museum curiosity and a god!”

Mehmet’s neighbours were fucking again.

This time, he felt no desire whatsoever to masturbate to the groans and cries of their rutting, which all of a sudden seemed rehearsed and artificial. It wasn’t as if he thought he’d be

able to get it up, anyway, even if he tried listening through the wall again. He no longer craved an escape. He only missed Selin.

Mehmet knew it was wrong to resent Selin for trying to save her parents, for staying in Syria and not taking the leap of faith with him. He knew it wasn't as simple as her choosing them over him — he'd always admired her selflessness and charity — but Selin was kind, he realised now, to a fault. So no, it wasn't a case of her choosing them over him, but it *was* a case of her choosing their lives over her own.

Her father had already been tortured and executed by Assad for spearheading an underground Communist resistance movement, so who was to say that Selin and her mother weren't next?

It was cruel to think in such simplistic terms, Mehmet knew, but Selin had put all options of her teaching career, her financial prospects and further education on ice to care for Selma. She had chosen to help a life that was on its way out and, as a result, had opted *out* of her own life.

Mehmet was mad at himself for being selfish and fleeing when Selin had stayed, risking life and limb for her vulnerable mother. But he was also mad at *her* for making him feel selfish when he was trying everything he could, against all odds, to set up a life for them both in this hateful country. Now, he doubted if she would ever make the voyage to join him.

But most of all, Mehmet was mad at Selin for not acting selfishly *enough*, for never putting herself first, for not having the drive for self-preservation. It had struck Mehmet on occasions that it hardly seemed to matter to Selin whether she lived or died: that she had resigned herself to her fate, whilst Mehmet fought to beat out his own path. He wondered then if they would ever overcome such fundamental differences.

He hated Selin for not being as cowardly as him, for not bowing to the whim of spineless, self-salvation, as he had.

Above all, Mehmet hated Selin because her presence back home was a continual reminder that he had made a terrible mistake in leaving her and coming here.

Especially, he hated her for the guilt that mutilated his mind and the vile, bilious sense of helplessness which overwhelmed him every time he pictured what Gibson was doing to her, or was having done to her, in that very instant.

Gibson who, even now, was still yammering on behind the distorted curvature of Mehmet's old Panasonic TV.

What had happened to Selin didn't seem possible, *couldn't* have been possible.

"We've lost touch with how to commune with our dead, folks, oh yes Lord we have!" Jean preached.

"And if you believe — as indeed I do — that the soul either rises to heaven, sinks to limbo where the scales are weighed, or falls further still into purgatory, then we can all agree that wherever we go afterwards, our corpses are but a shell, an artifice which it is far from sacrilegious for us to repurpose. In fact, it is even a noble thing to do, folks!

"Why not celebrate our own mortality and rejoice at the vestiges of those left behind. We are born lost, folks, and then we are found and then ... oh then, folks, what's left of us should be treasured as artefacts, as canvas, as sculpture.

"The answer: my 'Anatomic Gift Act', which I will shortly pass in the States and hope to soon see introduced here in England.

“What you have witnessed tonight, folks, with Doug Hitch’s ingenious cyborg show is but the tipping point of a bright new future!

“I would like to — no! I would *love* to invite you folks here in the audience to witness in-person, and for you folks back home to witness via a secure, televised link, the world’s first body art exhibit, or ‘Necro-Technesis! Skin into paintings, bodies into reproductions of iconic sculptures and much, much more ...

“Help me, folks, to lobby this beautiful country of yours to legally change the status of bodies into artefacts. Help me so that we don’t have to dance in the shadows to bring you what you really want, so that we can each find our truest self-expression by remoulding our dead and augmenting ourselves with their remains to honour the ephemerality, the transience of our fleshy existence.

“I would love to invite you all to the inauguration of the first ever flesh art expo! I would love to invite you to bear witness to mine and Elsa’s cherished brainchild: a gallery that’s also the start of a new movement, a new way of life!

“I hereby invite you, folks, to ... HYPODERMIA!!”

Mehmet looked out the window right at the moment the flesh-drone dropped the first grenade.

As the explosion blew through Mehmet’s fence, tearing the rosebush and his windowpane to confetti, multiple things happened to him all at once.

First, he pictured in prophetic clarity the news headlines for the following day proclaiming him a terrorist whose bomb preparation had malfunctioned and killed him in his own back yard, almost taking out his innocent, Christian neighbours.

Second, Mehmet felt the derm-chip heating through Selin's skin again, searing them both from within.

As the blast swept towards his living room, Mehmet followed the inexorable pull of their bond and patched into her.

Chapter 10: Meat

Selin's skin blistered beneath the giant butterfly jar.

Mehmet felt the heat of the spotlight, magnified, searing. He took in, as she did, the dimly lit semi-circle arena of tiered, black collapsible diner chairs all facing inwards with her as the centre-point. There was a collective creak as the men in attendance, all dressed in near-identical three-piece suits with colourful pocket squares, leaned in as one. She tried surreptitiously testing the strength of her domed glass prison by leaning back against it, but the walls were reinforced and the base of the cloche seemed to have been welded to the floor: the thing had been built around her. There was no discernible way in or out.

He, or rather *she*, was naked.

Again, the sense of emptiness, the feeling that the very fabric of their love had been hacked apart. Mehmet was as trapped in her body as Selin was beneath the dome, unplugged from her mental and emotional states of being. A tourist in her shell. He could do nothing but sense as she sensed and watch on, helplessly.

A smoke machine pumped dry ice around the outside of the vivarium and Mehmet felt Selin's muscles wind in on themselves as the cold spread. The men began to shout incomprehensible things in her direction and she realised, in tandem with Mehmet, that within this pristine glass cocoon, a foreign object lay beneath her tongue.

It was the small guillotine of a razorblade.

“What a beautiful night for it, ladies and gentlemen ... or should I say not-so-gentle-men and one, very special lady.”

Laughter from wreathed shadows. Laughter that sounded, through the distortion of the translucent barrier, like a forest of trees being felled, one at a time.

“Prepare to see a goddess unmade, a rare beauty undone, folks. An unparalleled Middle Eastern Princess, an Arabesque angel ... deface herself before your very eyes.

Selin twirled.

Circling her, sidling out of then slinking back into the plumes of dry ice was Jean Gibson. Gibson, always Gibson. A man who had up until recently been an unknown entity and now plagued every moment of their existence.

Her hand flew to her legs, her waist, her neck — all the places that his assistant’s cold, soft tape had wrapped itself around her on Gibson’s whim.

She was still intact.

Strangely, the constellation of moles on her neck in the shape of the Big Dipper seemed to have gone entirely — not even the hint of scar tissue from surgical removal remained. But it was still her, Mehmet thought, this was still, unbearably, perfectly her.

Gibson snapped his fingers at Selin who bent in a grotesque mockery of a bow, nearly banging her head on the crystal encasement as she did so.

Now that the ice had settled, Mehmet could hear the men more clearly and, behind them, music floating through the throng. Frank Sinatra’s voice crooning:

Yes sir, that's my baby,

No sir, I don't mean maybe

Yes sir, that's my baby nowwwwww!

“Cut,” someone screamed, like a demonic director cauterising a film scene.

On command, Selin opened her mouth and drew the razorblade from beneath her tongue, the stainless-steel scraping over her bottom incisors.

This could not be happening, Mehmet thought. Somehow, they were beaming this hellscape into him through her body. They were doing it to scare him. Scare him out of doing what? Investigating Gibson and his show? He no longer cared what the legislator and that sham Frenchwoman did with the body parts they already had: they could make all the bullshit pseudo-art spectacles and whip up all the media frenzy they wanted to. It was preventing *future* migrants from being smuggled and skinned alive for their pelts that concerned Mehmet. But maybe that’s what had spooked them: he was wreaking havoc on their supply chain.

Yes, ma'am, we've decided

No ma'am, we ain't gonna hide it

Yes, ma'am, you're invited nowwww!

The reappearance of Gibson here, only moments after seeing him stand on-stage in the BBC recording studio ... it was an impossibility ... the anomalous chronology had exposed their cruel illusion for all that it was: a lie.

Unless *Le Lust Show* had been pre-recorded ... the auctioning off of Elsa’s arse cheek ... what if it had been a staged stunt rather than a live one?

So, *this* was real; Selin really *was* trapped here awaiting her fate like a lepidopterist's curio.

Somewhere in another world, Mehmet's living room was detonating, his glass of tea blown to fragments, his television set etherised, his body burning from the blaze and pinwheeling about the wreckage of his home. If he died back there, would he be bound here to Selin's form forever?

This couldn't be happening.

It was happening.

*By the way, by the way
When we walk up to the preacher I'll say—*

“Isn't she perfect, folks? Isn't she the fairest skinned Arab you've ever seen? Could almost pass for Caucasian, couldn't she, folks? I personally know a few new-rich debutantes who would kill to have skin that good for their up-coming breast augmentations,” Gibson drooled.

The men, each sipping a stupid-looking cocktail in a ridiculously shaped glass, cheered.

“Have her ruin that perfect body,” begged one of the men, stirring his pink drink with the toothpick end of a tiny umbrella.

*Yes sir, that's my baby
No sir, I don't mean maybe
Yes sir, that's my baby nowwwwwwwww!*

“You heard him,” Gibson barked. “Fuck yourself up.” And he snapped his fingers.

Mehmet could only scream in silence, entombed within Selin’s skin, as she held the blade out before her and began to slice her stomach.

“We can make it look any way we want it to,” Rob was saying.

“It won’t be as easy to send you packing as it was that Cambodian girl, but we’ve turfed out people with roots deeper than yours before. We’ve pulled them out of our earth and sent them back to the motherland.”

“She was Vietnamese,” said Mehmet.

“Whatever. You don’t have a depot full of incriminating evidence like The Queen’s Warehouse at your disposal and not make use of it to plant something on someone, like you, from time-to-time. It just seems a shame not to.”

After he’d patched out of Selin, the transplant in Mehmet’s hand had dismantled itself. He could feel the constituent pieces of it moving beneath his derma, rubbing acutely against his nerves and the strings of his internal workings.

As he listened to Rob and tried to still his violent urges, Mehmet pushed the metal and silicon debris around beneath the burnt surface of his left hand, watching as the pink hills and valleys mutated under his touch.

The link between him and Selin was severed for good.

There was no way back to her now.

Patching back into his body the previous night, Mehmet had been surprised to discover that he wasn't on fire, that the blast hadn't in-fact destroyed his home, but merely the perimeter he'd smeared with his claret. Was it possible that his trail of genetic breadcrumbs had actually succeeded in foiling the flesh-drone?

Or had it been his bigoted neighbour, Pat, who saved his life by calling the emergency services? The fire fighters had arrived so fast, it seemed highly likely that Pat had been spying on Mehmet through the pried-apart slats of her bedroom blinds, as she often did. Ever since she'd called the police on him for letting himself into his own house, her surveillance of Mehmet had become all the more obsessive. So, instead of his own ingenuity, did Mehmet have the chain-smoking, dog-abusing, self-appointed neighbourhood watch, prejudiced vigilante that was Pat to thank for saving his life? Would it have been end-game for him if she hadn't already been looking out for "suspicious activity" and thus so quick on the draw that the tracker insect had been scared off? If that were the case, Mehmet was indebted to Pat not because she cared for him in the slightest, but because of her desire to preserve her idyllic, white suburbia at all costs.

"People like me?" Mehmet asked Rob.

"Oh don't start that shit. I'm not racist, alright? I just have a low tolerance for bullshit."

"You're the one who brought up being racist, Rob, not me."

His superior flicked a piece of lint from the elbow of his jacket and said nothing.

"How was your conference, Rob?"

"Didn't you just hear that bit about me getting you deported?"

“Yes, Rob, I heard you, but before I go, I’m interested to know just how much Jean Gibson’s paying you?”

“What are you talking about, you—”

“I found a flyer in your office a while back. It detailed a London conference on Jean’s ‘Anatomical Gift Act’. I take it that was the same conference you’ve just come back from?”

“That? That was just some promotional crap that got sent around.”

“The thing is Rob, I also have a low tolerance for bullshit. And I reckon that you’ve had your wick dipped in this for quite some time now. I reckon that every time the government does a private auction for stuff in the Warehouse, you’re not just selling off posh cars or refugee boats ... I think you’re selling off as many pieces of the dead racked up down there as you possibly can. I think you and Jean have been selling this nation’s dead for quite a while now.”

Rob, ever the OCD germophobe, brushed imaginary dust from his lapels and straightened the half-Windsor knot of his tie until it was dead-centre with the line of his shirt buttons.

“I’m not the only one taking from the Warehouse though, am I?” came the retort. Rob’s bald head gleamed like a singing bowl.

As Mehmet pulled out the flesh-gun he’d slipped into his belt back in the ‘Soft-Tech’ section, he was reminded of the last time he’d confronted a superior officer. It had happened whilst he was serving in the Turkish Merchant Navy all those years ago.

In the lead-up to throwing his Chief Officer overboard, the other C.Os had attempted to ply Mehmet and the other Deck Cadets with liquor as regularly as they possibly could (ouzo or raki) to keep them compliant. The Cadets were working men whose fathers had been nobodies

— olive pickers and convenience store owners — whilst all the higher-ranking officers had fathers who were somebodies: generals and war heroes.

But as the other Cadets were busy drinking in their off hours, Mehmet would sneak off to his hammock to read *The Communist Manifesto*. He'd torn the covers off the book, ripped out the title page and wrapped it dutifully with the cover from a hardback edition of Tanpinar's *The Time Regulation Institute*, itself a text on the fringe of being banned. Marx and Engels' tome was in the original German, so there was little chance of anyone discovering what he was up to. The other Cadets referred to it as Mehmet's "dirty book" believing it to be smut he'd knock one out to in secret.

One day, Mehmet's C.O., a giant of a man named Bulent who sported a thick moustache trimmed into the severe line of an em-dash, raided Mehmet's quarters and found the book. Rather than disciplining him or transferring him to some pen-pusher position, Bulent had taken Mehmet up to the top deck where he'd rallied the entire crew before whom he then proceeded to out Mehmet as a "filthy Socialist pig".

On reflex, Mehmet had pushed Bulent into the choppy Mediterranean where he narrowly avoided being sliced up by the immense propeller blades of the ship's motor.

Mehmet was given a meagre military pension and a dishonourable discharge. He couldn't help thinking that Marx would have been proud.

Right then, he wished he could have thrown Rob off a boat.

But instead of sending him overboard, Mehmet lifted the flesh-gun and aimed it at Rob's shiny forehead.

It had been hard to key a recognizable sequence into the flesh memory of its derm-grip, what with his missing two fingers, but he'd finally succeeded. Now the thing responded to him and only him. The sensation of the contact between his skin and the skin on the gun was making him nauseous. It was like engaging in a clammy and protracted handshake. Except, rather than a hand, it was a phallic, slanted magazine full of bullets. Mehmet pictured each one of those bullets shooting from the womb of the gun and piercing Rob's impeccably maintained surface. He tapped his unique morse code into the pressure points of the flesh, having to dig deep into the pink, jellied sheath to find them.

The flesh gun's safety was now off.

Tracing the trajectory of each bullet in his mind, Mehmet imagined one shattering Rob's teeth, another passing through his tie, piercing squarely through his Adam's apple. He pictured other bullets tearing the dustless façade of Rob's jacket and perfectly pressed shirt into ribbons. He would save the last two bullets for Rob's eyes.

But Mehmet couldn't do it.

After pushing his C.O. off the merchant vessel in a mutiny of one, Mehmet had lost his financial independence and, with it, the chance to put Selin through the rest of university and to pay for the medical bills and nurses who took care of her ailing mother in Bodrum. In the aftermath, Selin had had no choice but to abandon her education, return to working in her uncle's internet café and take up nursing her mother in all her spare moments. Mehmet, for his part, had slipped into a deep depression and sunk the slim monthly fund of his pension package on booze: compliant and drunk at last, just as his superiors had always hoped he'd be.

Because of Mehmet's wounded pride, Selin had lost all chance at a life that was hers, instead bound to the role of carer, trapped once more by the suffocating domesticity that it had once taken every ounce of her strength to escape. Mehmet's dumb ego had once cost Selin her chance at happiness and he couldn't do that to her again.

She was relying on him giving her a place to stay in England, in giving her the hope of a safe refuge at the end of a brutal and hopeless journey — provided she came — and he couldn't take that away from her.

Her life, he realised then, was worth more to him than his own.

If he pulled the fleshy trigger, Mehmet would set a chain of events in motion that could only end in him imprisoned, injured or killed.

If he left now, and didn't turn back, there was a chance Mehmet could still fight Rob's threat of deportation on legal grounds. If he left now, there was still a chance he could keep his half-life on this inhospitable isle and work out some sort of existence for himself.

Mehmet astral projected, watching in disbelief from his aerial vantage as his right hand reversed the arming sequence in the skin-grip and placed the gun on Rob's desk. That couldn't be him doing it, it just couldn't. Mehmet watched as Mehmet took several steps back from the gun and dropped his arms to his sides in submission.

"Knew you didn't have it in you, you dirty rat," Rob spat. "Oh, and you're fired, by the way," he added cheerily, sweeping the gun into his desk draw, "effective immediately. Forgot to say."

“I figured,” Mehmet’s mouth said, as his foot kicked over Rob’s coat stand of immaculately pressed jackets. Then he fled the office.

The ouroboros had been hammered into the chemical toilet wall until Kit’s skin had split.

Probably done with a nail gun, Mehmet reasoned absently — having immediately disassociated upon seeing the patch of flayed human hide — considering the blunt-force-trauma with which it had been pinned there. The section of Kit’s skin, on which the serpent was inked, had been cut from her arm and left there: the rest of her nowhere to be found. The graft had been removed from her only a day or two ago, judging by the dried and crinkled edges of the patch. Kit, who by this point had been missing for over seven days. Her skin was the first sign Mehmet had received that she was still alive. Or, rather, it proved that she had been alive some forty-eight hours prior when the sample was extracted. There was no smell of Formalde-HIDE upon the skin, no acrid, savage, cloying odour of raspberries upon her remains, which meant it had been taken from her fresh, taken from her whilst she was still living.

Kit had been alive two days ago.

It was something.

The snake no longer held the magic it once had for Mehmet, when he and Kit had smoked the Lithuanian driver’s hash together what felt like a lifetime ago.

Now, it was deflated, more a symbol of decay and fallibility than the reincarnation and metamorphosis she had sworn it possessed. The mythic icon was now nothing more than a sun-baked worm, cooked into extinction.

The stench in the portaloos was almost unbearable and Mehmet covered his mouth with his sleeve bunched in the three remaining fingers of his right hand as he reached with his left to yank the portion of Kit's arm off the lightweight, moulded plastic.

Kit's derma had turned as supple and elastic as a beaten animal pelt and it almost pulled the nail out of the wall with it as Mehmet yanked.

The patch tore free at the last moment.

On the back of Kit's arm, scrawled in biro were two postcodes and three accompanying words. Above the first code was etched in greasy ink the word: 'HYPODERMIA', whilst the second was prefaced with: 'YOUR RIDE'.

The hand in which the message had been written was so slanted, each bunch of letters and numbers sloping down dangerously at the end, as if whoever had written them had been fighting off the effects of some heavy tranquiliser with every carved sequence of characters. Mehmet couldn't be sure if the hand was Kit's, or not. The sharp axes of the two 'Y's, angled so that they resembled a child's slingshot, reminded him of the way Kit always did her y's when she signed off on a casefile as 'Kitty', but the remaining letters were all but mangled into ambiguity.

Mehmet thought about how the lining of the skin he now held in his hands had once pressed directly upon Kit's muscles, onto her fat and veins and tendons. He thought, dimly, about how the internal workings of her body had been cruelly exposed by removing this piece — how whoever had done this to her had lifted it out of her like hefting the side-panel off a computer's CPU to check the circus of resistors, adapters, coils and mazes of copper wire beneath.

Mehmet shivered and nearly dropped Kit into the open bowl of the toilet with its streaks of congealed dark blue bleach which ran down to meet the human excreta and sodden paper in the holding tank.

Upon believing that someone had barricaded him in, Mehmet experienced an acute panic attack, beating at the walls until the cubicle nearly toppled over.

When he came to, he didn't have a clear sense of how much time had passed, or of whether or not he had been screaming. The toilet sensor had been activated and subsequently discharged a large quantity of mucus-like ultramarine bleach that Mehmet's shaking had tipped out of the bowl. The stuff slimed the floor. Within the thick puddle were visible the vivid boot prints Mehmet had trodden into it in an agonised criss-cross of footfalls.

He placed his disfigured hand on the wall, counted to sixty and then realised he had bolted the toilet from the inside.

ENGAGED flipped to *VACANT* as he slid the latch across, stepping out into the Port and blinking in the glare of the sun. Seagulls careened and wailed about above him.

Miraculously, the piece of Kit had remained tightly clasped in his hand throughout the attack and was untarnished by the azure disinfectant gloop.

Blue flecked his trousers. Blue dripped from his boots.

With the shaking, bleach-stained fingers of his spare hand, Mehmet keyed the second of the two postal codes into his smartphone and started walking.

Chapter 11: Freeport

The Yamaha swam through the night, navigating them on flesh-memory.

He clung to the sides of its fuel tank, warmed through by its motor which vibrated through him, shaking every cell in his body. Its suspension took in every kink and imperfection in the road and swung into it, moulded to the surface of the backroads and highways as if it had long anticipated their union. As one, they roared across the border of Kent into Greater London, through Essex, Cambridgeshire, Suffolk and finally into Norfolk, miraculously hitting mostly green lights on the way and running the few that were red.

Mehmet felt less than useless: the tank was full and the bike's clutch found its biting point all by itself as it chewed through the gears. The Yamaha, in addition to its unexpected self-steering feature, seemed cognizant, Mehmet thought, conscious even. He couldn't shake the sense that the machine, or being, had been shaped for him and him alone; he wondered if Kit had felt the same way about it. Back when he'd gotten high on the beach, unshackled from his body, Mehmet had taken the Yamaha's reptilian angles and sleek techno-derm shell to be yet another facet of his paranoia, but now it was clear that all along Kit had been driving a piece of black-market tech and parking it on NCA property right under Rob's nose. She must have been in flagrant violation of government codes for as long as she'd worked for the Border Force and Mehmet couldn't help but admire her nerve.

Such reflection on Kit's rebellious streak caused him to doubt just how directly she had been implicated in the conspiracy with Rob and Gibson. Though Mehmet's Level 3 overseer had all but admitted to having the balloons of heroin planted inside Thi's body to frame her — thereby tying up yet another loose-end — and though Kit was likely the officer who'd carried out

the act itself, that certainly didn't rule out coercion. Someone of Kit's devil-may-care attitude, who habitually imbibed illicit substances and had a penchant for black market cyber-cell machinery, certainly wouldn't have sunk to Rob's level of moral corruption without putting up a fight.

As Mehmet and the lizard-bike jived between pitch-black lanes and carriageways polkaed with streetlamps — here he watched their shadows stretching out unnaturally before snapping back and sprouting from beneath them over and over between each pool of light — he thought about the number 2. It had been *two* days since Kit had last been confirmed to be alive. *Two* days within which she could have moved, or been moved, anywhere. Had her flayed ouroboros tattoo been a warning? Had she left it there herself? The only way to get his attention? That seemed ridiculous — there were, indeed, much easier and less violent ways of leaving a message. Couldn't Kit have rung? Or, if she were so worried about the call being traced, place a note somewhere only he would find it: a letter, a post-it, sketches on a napkin ... anything?

Could it really have been her who'd left the cryptic set of instructions scrawled on the insides of her body? Was she somewhere, trapped or in hiding: getting Mehmet to hitch a ride on this wheeled Komodo dragon in some sort of absurd rescue mission? Was Mehmet the one being saved?

That left the second option: that he was being driven straight into the lion's den. At once, the bike, something which a moment ago had been a sort of sensual symbiote, a sleek predator sending vibrations through his balls and prostate until he was uncomfortably hard, now seemed closer to the technology of the drone, its movements orchestrated by Gibson or some creepy puppeteer, drawing him along, bloodthirstily to nowhere good.

The first coordinates had led him to the same spot on the beach where they had tripped eight days prior. The bike had sat there, on the same pebbled dune, as if no time had passed at all, keys in the ignition, helmet hanging pendulous from its handgrip. Inviting. Too inviting, but Mehmet had been desperate for familiarity in that instant, any shred of comfort, or escape. And so, he had taken the chance for a way out of Dover Port with its tides of bodies and bad news, gratefully and without question.

Now, many hours later, with still no idea where they were headed, save that the postcode was linked to Gibson's launch (his phone had been unable to name the location of the coordinates), what Mehmet had first taken for escape was looking increasingly like a trap.

They arrived, at last, passing a sign that read: *Norwich Freeport*.

The drab series of buildings weren't much to look at.

But beside them was an open airplane hangar, a lattice of camera and lighting rigs spanning the inside of its high ceiling above a glitter of uplighters. Lights bracketed to scaffolding poles were being winched up or lowered by a series of ropes, some turned by cranks and winches, others with whole teams of workers straining to hold them steady.

The thing oozed light. Crews of technicians and operators tinkered with, and made adjustments to, the filigree of tech in the heights of the structure, raised into the web of cables and glitter of showbiz machinery on the shoulders of scissor lifts and spider booms. Set designers scurried about below them, swarming like agitated termites over set pieces, light screens and staging blocks. This had to be it, Mehmet thought, the televised launch of *Hypodermia*.

He left the Yamaha beneath a screen of trees and approached the hangar.

To the side of the Freeport facilities was the vast ink spill of the Atlantic Ocean. Water followed him wherever he went. Or, perhaps, it was Mehmet that was drawn to it, having lived at sea or adjacent to it his whole life. He was not the sort to tolerate a land-locked existence. The Atlantic carried with it a colder air than the Channel or Mediterranean. It was a rougher sort of beast and the salty chill of it, heavy in the air, carried with it a sort of muted violence.

Mehmet walked without hesitation, drawn by invisible cables winching him along from his belly, until he stood under the lip of the hangar, hand raised to shield his eyes from the light that dripped from its maw.

“Ahhhhh, the missing piece,” said Jean Gibson, and gave him a hug.

The fight went out of Mehmet and he stood there, mute, head resting on Gibson’s breast.

He was still in a state of semi-paralysis when Gibson patted him on the back, linked arms with him and led him out of the recording studio and through a series of bright tunnels and passageways into the core of the Freeport itself.

“I gave some serious thought to threatening you, arming myself to coerce you and all that, but I just figured that this would be simpler. More civilized, don’t you think? Why go through all the ritual of intimidation when we can just do this with dignity? After all, you’re invaluable to me; I’d hate to see you harmed. Having learned about that little stunt you pulled with Rob, I figured if I treated you with respect, you might just respect me in kind. I hate mess, Mehmet, and drama — though of course I’d understand why you might find that hard to believe — I really do. I really prefer things simpler. Cleaner. I nearly had you shot with a tranquilising gun and dragged here like an animal, which would have been barbaric, truly, so I’m very glad Elsa talked me out of it. Honestly, I’m impressed you got here in such good time. First visit to

East Anglia? No? Well, this Freeport's brand new, so I thought given you've been so courteous to me, I may as well return the curtesy and give you a tour of the place. It really is a marvel, Mehmet.

“The press will be here tomorrow for the great unveiling, but we've got a lot to do before then and you'll be playing a pivotal role. We simply couldn't do this without you. Elsa was so pleased you could come, she really was and sends her regards, said she was sorry you two were never going to cross paths: unavoidable really, of course, though still a shame.”

“I'll let you see Selin soon ... she's fine ... honestly she is ... it's a shame we had to project all those horrors into your mind through your chip, but we couldn't afford to be direct. We had to give you a justified reason to fight your way here and if that meant letting you indulge your little white knight complex, then so be it.”

“None of that was real?”

“Nope.”

“You broke into our closed system and simulated all that ... all those—”

“We hacked you, Mehmet. I had a team hack your body.

Numbly, Mehmet allowed the information to pass through him like ice water.

Now he knew why the rich, inner world of Selin's mind, heart and soul had been veiled to him, why he'd been locked out of every part of her save her body when they'd patched. Their recent shared memories had been falsified. How unique and special was their love for each other if their connection could be so easily forged? He had gotten so caught up in searching for her, in

the pursuit of her, in seeing her in Thi and in the people he had tried so desperately to save, that Selin had melded with every part of what had been driving him. Now, he wondered, what worth his actions had ever carried if they had all been built upon the foundations of untruth. He had wanted so badly to be Selin's saviour, to believe in a life in the UK with both of them in it, in wanting to make it a safer, less cruel and more empathetic place for her when she arrived that he had been blind. Blind to his delusions and the ways he had been manipulated with the promise of love as easily as an affection-starved child.

"It really wasn't all that hard to do," Jean continued, "that surgeon you both found God-knows-fucking-where did such a piss-poor job, I'm surprised you weren't hacked sooner. Learned a lot of valuable things about you when I had one of my cyberpunks slip into your derm-chip and root around in there. After we figured out what made you tick, it wasn't too difficult to project a simulacrum of your worst anxieties come-to-life and mainline them through your nervous system so that they read as believable. How were we to know it was going to overheat the way it did. Pity about that, really, I was trying to keep you as un-blemished as possible."

"So Selin's OK?"

"Yes, you love-sick fool."

"Is she here? Do you know where she is?"

"Of course, I do. No more questions, you're starting to bore me. You can't bore me before we've even started having fun."

Mehmet, deflated, no longer caring what Gibson did with him next, followed in his wake.

“Post-Brexit, as I’m sure you’re aware, the number of Freeports in this country have spiked. Sure, they’re free self-storage for the rich, they simplify customs processes and, if you believe the British Ports Association’s by-line, they also help make coastal communities more prosperous. Official narrative aside, Freeports are known by dealers and collectors as the premier place to stash their most valuable works. Here, in this particular site alone, you’ll find thousands of wooden crates containing astonishing rarities, half a million artworks — among them paintings by all the Grand Masters. or contemporary geniuses like Picasso, or Jenny Saville — a hundred-odd thousand boxed sculptures — some Rodin and Wei Wei originals amongst them — countless precious metals and close to a million bottles of rare wine, making this one of the largest wine cellars in Europe. Gallery owners and art collectors rent these spaces not just because they’re one of the biggest stocks of art in the world, or merely because it’s a non-taxable zone — meaning merchandise is exempted from value-added tax until it leaves the building — no, it’s not even that the controlled level of humidity (always kept perfectly around fifty percent) and temperature (never higher or lower than 18-20 degrees Centigrade) makes it the most ideal environment for the preservation of priceless treasures. It’s not even that the alarmed doors are bulletproof and weigh some seven tonnes each. It’s the *privacy*. The anonymity of a place like this. It just smacks of discretion, don’t you agree, Mehmet? There are companies based here which specialise in the restoration and authentication of artworks, which is all very fascinating, but don’t worry, there are some much more fun, and much, *much* seedier deals and goings-on here too. It’s all very arousing, don’t you agree? The art capital of the world might still be Beijing , but it’s *here* that the most electrifying and subversive art auctions you could ever dream of are happening!”

Every corridor they passed down was pasted with a collage of ‘No Photographs’ and ‘Trespassers Will Not Be Tolerated’ signs.

“Here, for instance, is the beginning of Elsa Lustrine’s latest performance art piece, to be unveiled tomorrow at the inauguration. It’ll also be her last ever show, or so she claims. I do hate spoilers, don’t you? But I feel like her film merits a sneak-peak when we’re dealing with something of this magnitude, don’t you reckon?”

On-screen, Elsa was wrapped up like a burn victim.

Her flaming hair obscured by a white bandage wrap that swathed her head, save for a single wisp of russet that had escaped the folds. Gauze torqued her mid-rift, crushed her breasts — one butchered, one whole — uncomfortably and then twirled about her in ever-looser reels, like a bobbin of ribbon coming undone, until it didn’t so much bind her scarred hips and thighs as hang limply from them. Her hands, as she greeted her imagined audience in the recording playing from the wall screen, were chequered with a riot of plasters, some blue, some green, the rest an assortment of every shade of human skin in existence.

“Welcome mes enfants and bienven— fuck it, I can’t keep this up!”

And so saying, Elsa ditched her phony Parisian drawl like a salamander shedding its tail to escape.

Her real accent was a reedy English private school voice. She sounded Eton educated, Mehmet thought, possibly Harrow.

“Darlings! There comes a time when each and every one of us must let fall the curtains of our façades and discard the unessential.

“In the tradition of Yoko Ono’s 1964 *Cut Piece* and Marina Abramović’s 1974 *Rhythm 0* performance works, I will be christening our *Hypodermia* launch with the ultimate act of self-erasure.

“The truth of the matter is that I have built myself up into an icon and now I will show you just how easy and necessary it is to fall from a great height. My contribution to *Hypodermia* will be art for the masses in the truest meaning of that phrase. I will embark on the purest deconstruction of the body medium imaginable. Let this recording stand as testament that tomorrow on [DATE REDACTED] I will be giving myself wholly to my fans.

“One piece at a time is not enough. We are born, we purchase our identities, we mass-produce our lives, curate our existences and then what? ... we disintegrate. One piece at a time is not enough and though you have made me rich, it is time for you to claim the versions of me you projected onto my body. Reabsorb your fantasies and fetishes and dreams. Take what’s left. You have eaten up my image, my brand, my guests, a lucky few of you have even grafted aspects of my corpus onto yourselves or mounted my choice morsels on your mantelpieces, but the news cycle turns faster every day, and you will be bored with me before all too long. If you want me, if you *really* want and lust for me and everything I represent, then tomorrow you will come to *Hypodermia* and finish what we’re started!”

“She’s full of shit,” said Jean flapping a hand in the direction of the screen as Elsa’s bandaged body faded to black. “She loves Givenchy couture and Vogue cover shoots too much

to part with all that. Materialistic to the end — I personally don't buy she'll go through with a stunt like that, if only to stay on this planet with her ten-thousand pairs of shoes a little longer!"

Another display room.

Mounted perversities, full-bodied taxidermized people re-shaped and repurposed so as to represent scenes from famous movies or known reliefs.

In one room, Mehmet saw the skin suits from the Reefers that he and Himari had impounded, now stuffed to replicate the famous sparring scene from *Seven Samurai*, where Kyuzo faces off against an unknown challenger. Both sculptures had their swords drawn, perfectly recreating that scene in the movie where the warriors had seemingly reached an impasse before the unnamed samurai slowly keeled to the floor, revealing that he had in-fact been run through by Kyuzo. And now that Schrodinger's moment, that coin toss between death and survival from Kurosawa's epic, was immortalised. A moment that already appeared to freeze in black and white when watched in the 1954 original had now been canonized in the flesh.

In another room, a herd of bison regarded Mehmet with melancholy eyes. The one closest to him, its lids half-closed, shed a single tear of polyester resin. Each of their shaggy, protruding skulls seemed to expand until they filled the room. Though there was still a pride in the way each of their gargantuan shoulders were bunched mid-charge, there was something about their scraggly beards and the crescent moons of their nostrils that spoke to a predetermined defeat: to the gradual decline and near extinction of their species from over-hunting. Their dark, cloven feet preserved with alkyd paint were each suspended in different stages of animation, as if the whole herd were about to be run off a cliff. Whoever had staged these magnificent beasts hadn't

been able to pack enough polyurethane foam and wood into their hulking hides to curate the sadness out of them.

In yet another, a tower of bone boxes. Each glass case and freshly cut pine shelving showcased countless pieces of human remains robbed from Native American graves, pillaged from sacred burial sites and torn away across mountains and cities and seas until the skeletons of each ancestor had been as distanced from their descendants as it was possible to get. Here was testimony to the ransacking of family trees, to the butchering of lineage and legacy by colonisers. This wasn't just a monument to that suffering, it was a prolongation of that suffering, Mehmet realised. The Freeport was keeping the bones from being returned to their rightful resting places. It was a prison for the dead.

“Cute, right?” was all Jean had to say about them.

A further room housed oiled mannequins arranged in legions, life-sized replicas of the wire and wood figurines used as reference points for anatomy classes. On the heads of each were a sequence of skin masks in varying stages of preservation, empty eye sockets and mouth holes framing the red lustre of polished cedar.

A room displaying abstract Rothko and Kandinsky forgeries on skin canvasses, the reproductions all the better for the ways the human wallpaper had distorted and faded the brush marks.

“Aren't they just breath-taking? And the best thing about them, Mehmet, is that their value will only keep increasing with time.”

“The Anatomic Gift Act was just a front? Did you believe a single word you said about wanting to save the souls of the homeless and addicted? Did part of you ever want to offer salvation, to reconnect the bodies of the lost to the world that had abandoned them?”

“It’s up to you what you choose to believe, I can’t take that from you.”

Jean’s smile tore Mehmet open.

There was no God or glory. Nothing but abuses of power behind the scenes. Mehmet realised in that moment that he had been holding out, first with Kit’s insights into the never-ending process of replenishment of the human skin and, second, through his recent return to religion for a sign that his skin held something larger than just him, that it was coded with the divine or inexorable. He realised then just how much he’d needed to believe that it wasn’t just another trafficked organ, but something deeper, something truly profound and spiritual. Mehmet had even read a passage from the Quran — Sûrat Az-Zumar, verse 23 — some days prior that said: *The skins of those who fear their Lord shiver from it (when they recite it or hear it). Then their skin and their heart soften to the remembrance of Allah.* As absurd as it was, Mehmet had begun to trace that passage obsessively, reading it to himself, to his own body over and over. And as Mehmet orated, he started to think about how, if skin cells could respond to certain frequencies, then why couldn’t they also vibrate to the voice of God, to holy frequencies and not just sonic waves? What if, hearing Allah’s hallowed verses and lessons through Mehmet’s lips, his own cells might start to radiate goodness? But throughout his experiments, Mehmet had heard nothing, felt nothing. His derma had never responded to the call. His cells, no doubt, were filled with disbelief and hypocrisy. Mehmet had atheistic skin. He had doubted for so long, that now his body would no more respond to the sound of belief.

With Jean's smile, Mehmet abandoned all the hope he'd invested in his search.

There was no fight left in him now.

"I know it's not quite Ali Baba's cave, and we certainly don't have the forty thieves waiting in here to jump out at you,"— here Jean let out a laugh like a cherry bomb—, "but this is home for me. Welcome, Mehmet, to my *Emporium!*"

"This, Mehmet, is a showroom. A showroom in a Freeport is essentially an exhibition room which is vital for a collector, such as myself, as it allows me to stay in touch with my pieces, to come and look at them, to move them, exchange them, augment them. Presentation is everything, as I'm sure you know."

Jean snapped on a pair of white cloth gloves and began to undo the cover of a thin, upright-standing box, some nine feet wide and eight feet high. It had 'MUY FRAGILE' and 'THIS WAY UP' signs with corresponding black arrows printed across its plywood surface. One-by-one Jean yanked nails out of the plyboard with a hammer, to an accompanied torturous screeching, dropping them into his jacket pocket until the cover was free. Then the legislator lifted the wall away and Mehmet saw the artwork he'd most dreaded seeing.

It was another flesh painting, patchworked in a medley of skin hues in tandem with the vast swathes of inked shadows and the gradations of luminous, waxy light that intersected them. It was the same painting Mehmet had seen in fragmented silk panels on Doug Hitch's runway, the same painting he'd seen panel pieces of in The Queen's Warehouse.

The painting depicted a cohort of satyrs skinning an upside-down man. Except, where the flayed man should have been, there was a gap in the art piece, a garish void in the narrative.

“‘The Flaying of Marsyas’, by Titian ... you know it?”

“I know someone inside it,” said Mehmet, thinking with great sadness of Thi and wondering which of the fleshy segments had once belonged to her.

“You’re familiar with the story behind it, though, of course? The satyr Marsyas claims he can get the best of the god Apollo in a musical contest; he plays the flute so beautifully that Apollo realises he could never match him with his own harp, but then he turns his harp upside-down and, because he’s ambidextrous and the instrument’s symmetrical, Apollo plays it just as well in reverse. Marsyas, however, up-ending his flute, can make nothing but the most heinous spluttering and foghorn noises and so loses the bet. As punishment for daring to question the might of a deity, Apollo has Marsyas flayed alive.

“I love the pathos of the tale, Mehmet, I really do, not least of which because of the way this story has played out in the arena of your and my life oh-so recently. I thought about having you killed with one of those drones — it always makes me feel warm and fuzzy to give our Russian patrons something to write home about — but then I realised that you had a much larger role to play. I realised how you, unwittingly, in attempting to crack down on my operation and my commissioning of this painting, acted out the very story it depicts. You, Mehmet, are the contemporary re-incarnation of Ovid’s Marsyas. Now, I’m not going to say that I’m in the same wheelhouse as Apollo, of course I’m not, but you challenged my authority, just as our eponymous satyr questioned the majesty of the sun god, and now you too will bear the crushing burden of your own hubris.

“Wild, don’t you think, how these stories replay themselves over and over? Wild, even, to consider that Titian made himself a character in his own artwork, which he painted largely by applying oils directly to the canvas with his fingers. Wild that this painting about flesh, created with hands used like brushes, has now been reproduced *upon* that same flesh as its final medium.

“The skin is the living embodiment of cycles, Mehmet. Replenishing itself even as your own narrative parallels and replenishes that of Marsyas, here. Over and over, these patterns will repeat themselves.

“When I said you were the missing piece, Mehmet, I really did mean it. I can’t offer you the chance of becoming a god,” here Jean shrugged, “but I *can* help you to live forever!”

“I should come clean,” Jean continued. “I’ve told you two lies this evening,” and with that he shot a tranquiliser dart into Mehmet’s neck.

“Lie number one, I always plan for every eventuality, so of course I came armed.

“Lie number two, I’ve no idea where your sweetheart is, never have! I haven’t the foggiest where she could be. She could be safe and happy for all I know. Or not.”

“Anyway, cheer up pal, you look a bit blue,” he said peppily as Mehmet crumpled to the floor. “It’s not every man that gets to become immortal.”

Surgeons appeared from the shadows like demented turquoise phantoms, pulling a gurney behind them. All but their eyes, bulbous behind coke-bottle lens goggles, were obscured by masks, face shields, surgical suits, rubber boots and latex gloves.

As in a sleep paralysis nightmare, any connectivity between Mehmet’s mind and body had been severed by the drug and he could only watch as a bystander to his own kidnapping as

they lifted him from where he'd collapsed and spread him out on the hospital bed. Whilst he roared mental commands at his limp and pathetic body, the orderly butchers laid out their tattoo guns, ink sets, a pot of lubricant, a pack of baby wipes and their scalpels, flensing knives, and the ritual tantric flensing blade of the Kartika, on the steel tool tray fixed to the bedframe.

Gibson put a record on an ancient gramophone in the corner of the showroom and stood back to watch proceedings. The record juddered to life with a scratch of the needle.

Then they strapped Mehmet down, fitted him with a canular into which was slotted an IV drip, and set to work tattooing him.

Chapter 12: V

The voices of Dean Martin and Helen O'Connell drifted in and out of his medicated haze.

How d'ya like your eggs in the morning

How d'ya like your eggs in the morning

I like mine with a kiss

I like mine with a kiss

Boiled or fried

I'm satisfied, as long as I get my kiss

The clash of their rollicking duet with the metamorphosis his body was undergoing was suddenly hilarious to Mehmet. He would have giggled, but his facial muscles weren't moving as they ought to. His laugh came out as a spluttering cough.

How d'ya like your toast in the morning

How d'ya like your toast in the morning

As they finished tattooing Mehmet's ribs and stomach and pecs with the same chiaroscuro effects employed by the Italian Master, he tried to take in the blur of their masked faces. But they all looked the same with their bug eyes bulging behind thick plastic and masks trailing blue afterimages like the smears of light in an over-exposed polaroid. Their clear visors reflected his face back at him, but they had tattooed that too so that Mehmet no longer recognised himself. His last thought before he drifted out of consciousness again, was that at least his beard was growing back.

*I like mine with a hug
I like mine with a hug
Dark or light
The world's all right
As long as I get my hug*

When he came to, the inking was complete and they were parting him from his skin.

Some movement had returned to Mehmet's body and he turned about him. They were still in the showroom acting as operating theatre. Perversely, the same song was playing. Jean was nowhere to be seen, but someone must have put the record back on. Had it been playing throughout the whole procedure?

The incomplete skin painting watched him. The violinist and the dogs and the satyr holding out the gleaming bucket ready to catch Marsyas' blood called out to him, speaking in seductive tones, which turned to jeering and then hurled insults and obscenities. The painted figures screamed at Mehmet, at him, the centrepiece who would soon cement the purpose of their gathering.

A slice of the scalpel, a skip of the gramophone needle.

There, beside the gurney, next to a few glass painting frames propped up against the concrete wall, was a full polar bear pelt laid out flat on the floor as a rug, its paws still attached to the ends of its flaccid limbs, mouth propped open, yawning to reveal black gums sprouting pristine white teeth.

*I've got to have my love in the morning
Or the rest of my day is positively mayhem*

They peeled Mehmet like an orange.

I'm a regular monster

How do you like your eggs in the morning

They were fleecing him.

Through the enveloping blanket of the anaesthetic, he found that the process tickled, was almost pleasurable, even.

I like mine with a kiss

Up or down I'll never frown eggs can be almost bliss

His inner self was being laid bare.

Just as long as I get my kisssssssssss!

There, on the gurney, lay the exposed ruins of Mehmet.

“You know,” said Gibson, reappearing, “if they pass my bill to legalise all skin art, thereby decriminalising the whole enterprise of so-called ‘modern slavery’, you’ll be out of a job. Not that it matters, you’re hardly in a fit state to return to work right now, are you? Do you think you’ll be missed?”

The gap in the painting was calling to its missing piece. Mehmet could hear it whispering to him again, begging, pleading to be finished.

“Humans are animals — we pretend we’re not, but we are — so why not skin each other for pelts like we do our fellow species? Why not let the numbers of endangered animals we’ve all but hunted to death climb back up and stabilise? The skin of our planet is hurting and yet we continue to do what we want with it. We tarnish and mar mother earth’s derma, so why not have fun with each other’s surfaces whilst we’re at it?”

With all the energy that his doped body could muster, Mehmet lifted the index and middle fingers of his right hand and held them up to Jean’s face.

“I’ve crossed oceans to be able to do this, know why?” he croaked through split lips.

“The peace sign?”

The surgeons had cut the skin clean off Mehmet’s legs, waist and stomach and were sawing away to free the rest of it from his chest and shoulders. Soon, all that would be left to take was the derma on his face.

“Peace sign’s the other way round. This is palm facing me, not palm facing you. No, this means ‘up yours’, or, ‘go fuck yourself.’”

“And I care... why?”

“In a minute, you will, in a minute you’ll care and you’ll see what I mean. Tell me you’re not yet another American in dire need of a history lesson? This is the V-sign.”

Here, Mehmet stabbed his two remaining fingers into the air once again for emphasis, thumb folded in behind them, two amputated stumps — his former ring finger and pinkie — quivering with the strain of the gesture.

The head of the polar bear rug watched them, marble eyes twinkling in amusement.

“Some people think this was Churchill’s ‘V for Victory’ rebuking the Nazis in the mid-40’s which was then reversed during the Vietnam war to become a counter-culture symbol. But the theory goes that it originated in the British victory against the French on the battlefield of Agincourt in 1415, when we ended the ‘Hundred Years’ War’. So, the English soldiers waved these two fingers at the French who’d threatened to cut off captured Anglo archers’ first two digits in order to prevent them shooting arrows ... the English, through this gesture, were therefore boasting that they were still capable of firing at the French, that their will was indomitable and that they could still shoot and kill the “frogs” any time they pleased, English Channel be damned. Fear didn’t win out, the day we won the war.”

They were cutting the last corner of skin away at Mehmet’s neck, lifting the whole thing off of him as if it were nothing more than an apron. They were reaching with flensing knives for his jaw and cheeks. In a matter of minutes, he would be unmasked.

“Careful, careful,” Jean jabbered at the surgeons. “This man’s about to become a priceless, world-altering work of art! Treat him with care, will you?”

Mehmet went on: “Thinking about stories like that are some of the few times I consider myself proud to be British. Doesn’t happen often, so I savour those moments, when they come around.”

He tried to laugh again, but the torque of his stretched-out derma made it impossible.

His body was moving, speeding up, rushing to meet the nebula at the heart of Titian’s masterpiece.

“I learnt *that* in my English citizenship exam, and it suits me just fine to believe it’s true. I’ve been through hell and back to hold my two middle fingers up to you. I’ve bartered my way

out of death's hands and — as you can see — lost two fingers for my efforts. But still ... but still ... I have fought and I am *here* and I can still show you: these two fingers are *mine*, and there's nothing you can do about them.”

Gibson bent closer.

“Is this supposed to change my mind, or somethi—?”

Before he could finish, Mehmet jabbed his outstretched fingers hard into the legislator's eyes.

Jean tore through the showroom, howling and clutching at his face.

The surgeons bolted, bloodied equipment falling and ringing out on the flagstones.

As if seen through the misted mirror of a dream, Mehmet watched Kit and Mahmoud tiptoe through the emporium.

“No,” continue Mehmet, unabated by the cacophony of Jean's anguish, “it's to show you I still have everything I came here with and there's no way you can take it from me. There's nothing you can take from me that hasn't already been taken. You can flay me, but that's it. That's all there is to it. Everything else endures. Everything else endures, you sad, limp-dick fucking bastard!”

“What have you done, you cunt? You've blinded me! I'm blind! I'm blind!” Gibson squawked, ricocheting off the walls like a pin-ball.

Mehmet passed out.

He came to a few seconds later and Kit and Mahmoud were still there, closer now, flickering in and out of his vision like guttering flames.

Jean, in his flailing terror, had opened the fortified showroom door.

Mehmet battled to stay conscious, having no idea, were he to pass out, if he would ever wake up again.

“I can’t see! You fuck! I can’t fucking seeeeee! I can’t fu—”

The Katana burst out the side of his neck and Jean’s words died on his tongue.

He tottered backwards, blonde hair billowing, stepped through the glass of a framed artefact and proceeded to paint bloody footprints into the polar bear, before collapsing in a tangle.

“Told you it was easy to take apart a human,” said Mahmoud, crows feet crinkling as he kicked the legislator off the end of his blade.

Jean spluttered red onto the arctic rug, rapidly draining away.

The last thing Mehmet saw before the lights faded was Kit, grinning and bending over him, saying;

“Sorry we’re late to the party, champ — hate to miss a show.”

And then ...

Curtains.

Epilogue: Expo

Elsa went ahead and launched Gibson's *Hypodermia* exhibit without him.

She capped off the unveiling of his artworks with her final ever performance piece.

The show-stopper.

Mehmet watched it all unfold from his makeshift hospital bed in Kit's living room.

Vast screens behind the main stage ran infomercials by Tesla and Microsoft, who appeared to be sponsoring her event.

Lustrine unwound her bandages beneath a glittering light-rig, plucked the plasters from her fingers before a firework of paparazzi camera flashes and fell, naked as the day she was born, into the pit of screaming fans.

She smiled serenely the whole time they torn her apart. And then her smile left her forever as someone stole her lips and others ate her mouth.

By the time the crowd dispersed, there was nothing left of the hostess but the embers of her hair.

"I told yer everything was going to hell in a hand-cart," came Kit's voice from beside Mehmet's shoulder.

"Ignore her," said Himari, smirking through the ying and yang of his two-toned visage.

"Video call for you," chirped Mahmoud, holding a phone screen up to Mehmet's face: the only part of him still intact.

Selin.

She had more grey hairs than Mehmet remembered, but was otherwise just the same as she'd always been.

“I never made the journey in the end, I'm still here in Istanbul with Ma and uncle,” she told him.

Mehmet spied the constellation of moles on her neck and counted them, just to be sure it was really her.

“The bombing has stopped, my love. The dust has settled,” Selin said. “Come home to me.”