

# Bhr̄ewā

Matters Dheghōm

*Dheghōm*  
*Erwā*  
*Bhéwonom*

Dheghōm Matters

*Bhrēwā*

# Bhr̄ewā

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*To true selves everywhere.*

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I hereby thank the following selfless individuals for telling me what was wrong with my original draft along with what I needed to do to make it less wrong.

*///Your name here?///*

You should probably thank them too. They've shielded you from some serious nonsense.

Richard A. Bartle





## Chapter 1

## A Number of Introductions

Our story begins in Boroughbridge, the scenic Yorkshire market town where what was once the Great North Road spans the River Ure. Here, in a new house adjacent to the prehistoric standing stones known locally as the Devil's Arrows, dwell three – well, they see themselves as young men, but it's not quite that simple.

The trio view age and time rather more subjectively than is commonplace. By some measures they are older than language. Still, they do have the appearance of being young, and in their heads consider themselves to be young, so we run into few difficulties by accepting that, yes, young they are.

As for being men, ah, now that's more involved. You see, they look for all the world to be attractive, youthful women. This doesn't bother them to the degree that one might imagine it would, for they are happy to have bodies at all. They call themselves Muses, and in due course we shall discover why.

'Muses' merely means more than one Muse, by the way. It isn't the name of an organisation. To avoid confusion, I shall refer to them as 'our Muses' because they feature in our story; 'the Muses'

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would include any other Muses with whom you (but not I) might be familiar.

Living with them is an elderly lady, Miss Jane Marple. She thinks of herself as the character from the Agatha Christie books, but knows that she isn't. "It's just as well", she once told me. "The intellectual property holders would experience a substantial degree of difficulty were they to attempt to sue the creator of this world's for breach of copyright."

It might seem unlikely that a fictional character could be as alive as you and – well, as you, anyway – but then Miss Marple's is an unlikely tale. Our Muses see her as a something of a mother figure, and she in turn is quite fond of them in a maternal way, never having had children of her own.

It was Miss Marple who gave our Muses their names – feminine, "so as to avoid any tiresome complications". She adapted these from the names of three of the nine Muses of Greek mythology, modernising them as best she could (not being a modern person herself). She was pleasingly successful in this exercise, and the results of her efforts were quickly worn with ease.

Perhaps now would be a good time to introduce you to our heroes, or perhaps heroines.

Oh, why don't I show you their pictures while I'm at it? I have them right here.



First we have Cally, who is the leader of the group – as Calliope was of the Muses of Greece. He is responsible, quick-thinking and intrepid, exhibiting a practical and forthright attitude that belies his fundamentally compassionate nature. Like all our Muses, he has a naturally deep Mediterranean tan, but unlike the other two his eyes are blue.

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Next we have Tally, who – as with the Greek Muse Thalia – is a delight. Witty, vivacious and vibrant, he *can* seem superficial – an impression completely disproven whenever he is called upon to think creatively. Tally is acknowledged by our Muses – and I concur, although I may be biased – to be the prettiest among them.



Finally we have Cleo, who like his namesake, Clio, is bookish and thoughtful. He is the introvert of the group, and wears spectacles even though his eyesight is flawless. He hopes that this mild affectation will stop men from bothering him, but it won't. It will only influence the type of men who bother him.

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I suppose that you now want to know who I am, don't you? Well, that will have to wait. Although I do play a minor part in the adventures of Cally, Tally and Cleo, I don't appear for quite a while; I'll make myself known when the time comes. For the moment, you need only note that I am familiar with, and fully appreciate, their lives. They told me themselves much of what I shall be relating, so you can definitely believe it. They try hard not to lie.

There are other members of the cast, too. Among those whom we shall encounter shortly are the husband-and-wife team of David and Melanie Scott. It was they who purchased our Muses their new-build home. Also of early significance is an intelligence officer known as Duncan K. C. Bright – although his surname is actually Moore. He is irritated that our Muses are acquainted with this classified nugget of information. They themselves, of course, regard such secrets – and they know many – merely as amusing trivia.

Let us recall how Mr Bright came to meet young Cally, Tally and Cleo, for this has some bearing on what will unfold. It's a little circuitous, but bear with me.

The aforementioned David and Melanie Scott are independent researchers into what they call "Matters Dheghōm". In their fifties now, they are the parents of twins, Seth and Edith, both of whom are currently doing MScs at university and neither of whom are at all interested in Matters Dheghōm. They know that they can't meaningfully affect

what goes on between their reality and any other, so invest no time in worrying about it.

David and Melanie don't have formal jobs as such. David owns a small book-publishing business that generates a modest income, and Melanie (who has a doctorate in Atomic Physics) holds two patents that contribute a similar amount to the household purse. Their financial situation greatly improved when, in late 2023, they were gifted two million dollars by the video game designer, Eugene Nethercott; without this windfall, they could never have afforded a new house in the Riverside Mills development suitable for three independent young women and an old lady. A significant proportion of the endowment does still remain; family homes in Boroughbridge can be expensive, but not *that* expensive.

The Scotts are also in recent possession of some impressive precious stones, which they are now in the process of gradually selling off. These were collected for them by our Muses, who – no, I'm getting ahead of myself. How they acquired them is related to why they live where they do, so let's take it in that order.

The location of our Muses' house was chosen not only because it was but a five- or ten-minute walk from the Scotts' own home, but more importantly because it was within range of the Devil's Arrows. When our Muses dematerialise – you did know they can do that, didn't you? – they can rematerialise only at a place determined from

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a set of a few hundred fixed locations. These spots are usually associated with ancient sites of worship. After all, if several thousand years ago you yourself were a person of a primitive culture and you saw someone appear seemingly out of nowhere, you'd probably wish to establish a place of worship there, too. Trust me, you would.

Our Muses can travel between such arrival points in an instant, which in general is both convenient and unproblematical. There is, however, a catch: when they dematerialise to visit their own place of provenance, it's only their bodies that do so. Nothing they are carrying or wearing dematerialises with them. Therefore, when they subsequently rematerialise in this world – which is called Dheghōm, by the way, as in "Matters Dheghōm" – they need to re-equip.

Happily, the Devil's Arrows stand on one of the sites that our heroes can use for teleportation, and the house that the Scotts bought for them was chosen specifically to lie comfortably within this designated arrival zone. Our Muses can therefore reach their home with impunity from wherever they might initially materialise (which is determined randomly from among all the arrival points). This is why their wardrobes host even more garments than is usual for the modern twenty-something young woman.

It is also why they have access to precious stones. Not every ancient site has yet been looted, and some are marked by the graves of once-mighty



monarchs. It is from these that our Muses select gems of a value far in excess of even Eugene Nethercott's generous donation to the Scotts.

I accept that, technically speaking, this occasional activity makes our Muses grave-robbers. Even so, we can perchance excuse them on the grounds that, from their very long perspective, all graves are robbed eventually, and a few thousand years is sufficient a period to allow for relatives of the deceased to come to terms with their grief.

I should also perhaps mention that when any one of our Muses leaves or enters this world then the others simultaneously do so too, along with Miss Marple. Miss Marple acts as the figurative thread that our Muses follow to enter Dheghōm; they could in theory follow another Muse, but given that all three must by necessity travel together, that rather closes off this prospect.

Fortunately for Miss Marple's blushes, she invariably rematerialises fully clothed, although always in the same outfit (which is not necessarily the one she was wearing when she dematerialised), of which she now owns many copies. Also, unlike our Muses, when she returns to Dheghōm after being away then she rematerialises in the same location from which she last dematerialised.

Don't worry, I *am* coming to how Duncan – let's indulge him – Bright came to meet our heroes. We'll get there soon, promise!

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So, Mr Bright runs a small section of MI5 that goes by the nickname (not codename, he assures us) of MI5.5. Its aim is to investigate what might be called “paranormal activities”, although its members don’t believe in the slightest that such activities *are* paranormal, only that their explanations are as yet not understood. The unit has been operational since 2013, and has in that time managed to acquire a small collection of objects with what might be called (because they are) “other-worldly capabilities”. These include a ring of insubstantiality, a rod of levitation and a pair of indestructible gloves. The workings of all such objects have defied scientific analysis, which MI5.5 can point at as the unassailable rationale for its continued existence.

Mr Bright became aware of the Scotts’ work, and that of several other UK-based groups, by monitoring Internet traffic to honeypot sites that his section set up. Assuming that David and Melanie were the regular variety of conspiracy-theorist cranks, he invited them to explain their beliefs over brunch – while a member of his team secretly photographed the key pieces of evidence that they had assembled. This backfired badly, and MI5.5 and the Scotts had something of a tiff.

Too late did Mr Bright realise the disconcerting possibility that his grasp of the status of his reality was incomplete. Suitably alarmed by this new understanding, he opted to maintain a hands-off approach to snooping on the Scotts: listening to

their conversations and observing their Internet activities, but not intervening in any way.

This proved relatively fruitful, until one day the Scotts began to speak in a language that he didn't know. Furthermore, no-one else in his unit knew it, either. Worse, he borrowed the services of Miss Phillipa Jackard, an asset of the US counterpart to MI5-5, who is able to understand all human languages, yet even she couldn't make head nor tail of what the Scotts were saying. He's now attempting to crack their speech using AI, but with little success. He has a very good reason for wishing to be able to do this, which we shall come to shortly.

You're still with me? Good.

When he discovered that David and Melanie were buying a second house near their home, Mr Bright was immediately curious as to the thinking behind this decision – especially as they had been very particular about where on the new estate this house must be situated. He arranged for it to be bugged to the nines, so that the behaviour of whoever moved in could be scrutinised in depth. Its first occupants turned out to be three young women and an old lady, all of whom (sadly for him) also spoke in tongues – although not in public. He decided to pay them a visit.

He introduced himself, and gently probed what they knew about Matters Dheghōm. It seemed that they knew a very great deal, but didn't seem to think much of it. He asked them if they wouldn't

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mind perhaps educating him in the finer details, maybe in a more formal setting. They professed to have better things to do, and declined.

In response, Mr Bright made an offer to help them, pointing out that they had no birth certificates, passports, driving licences or other forms of identification, but that he could arrange for the provision of these.

They were interested in this proposition, and advised him that they would happily answer his questions once he had stumped the documents up for them.

Having enticed them with his carrot, Mr Bright then moved on to his stick. He said he'd prefer to hear what they had to say first, and casually mentioned that he could make life very difficult for them. They were, after all, in the eyes of the law, illegal immigrants.

Our Muses agreed that they were indeed illegal immigrants, but they weren't particularly troubled by this. They did disclose, however, that they found his intimidation both distasteful and unhelpful.

Mr Bright nevertheless pressed on. He added – with an unnecessary dash of nonchalance – that he possessed the authority to have their house's utilities switched off, and commanded other measures that could inconvenience them far, far more. Would they perhaps reconsider the order in which the exchange of documentation for information might proceed?

At this, the Muses began a conversation among themselves, to which Mr Bright was not initially privy. Then, in what seemed to him to be English, Cally asked the spy, "Would you mind making a call from your mobile?"

Mr Bright intimated that yes, he would mind, so Tally volunteered to get him one of their spares.

When every time you leave a reality, you lose all you had about your person, you need a lot of spares.

The nearest such device was in the next room, and while Tally was bringing it, Cally asked Mr Bright to think of someone to contact using it – anyone, he didn't care whom.

Tally returned with the phone, which Mr Bright then employed to call the Samaritans – 116 123. When they answered, he pretended to be surprised and claimed that he'd called the wrong number.

The Samaritans' volunteer apologised, but said she didn't understand him. She spoke the names of some languages, in the hope that one would be meaningful and she could pass him on to a colleague proficient in it, but no matter how clear or slowly Mr Bright spoke, she could make no sense of him.

Mr Bright made three further calls: to NHS 111, to his barber and to his colleague, Mr Lampros. None of them understood his words, although he could completely understand theirs – and indeed his own.

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Cally explained that they could make this small difficulty go away if he promised to leave them alone. Cleo added that it might be convenient if he were to arrange for them to have the identification documents, too, to avoid attracting further nuisance from other state actors such as the police.

Paying for everything with cash is a bother, and charge cards require a bank account; Cleo didn't feel right about buying everything using Melanie Scott's.

It dawned on Mr Bright that his career, if not his entire way of life, was on the line here. Reluctantly, but graciously – as if our Muses had passed some kind of devious test of their integrity – he acquiesced.

Cally looked at Tally and Cleo, both of whom nodded in response, then he took the phone off Mr Bright and pressed redial.

He passed the phone back to Mr Bright, who was then able to assure Mr Lampros that everything was fine and he'd explain it all in the debriefing.

Miss Marple entered and asked if Mr Bright would like a cup of tea, chiding her charges for not having offered him one earlier. This, he accepted.

While she was making it, the now somewhat chagrined Mr Bright explained that he could call on the UK Protected Persons Service to furnish them with formal identity documents. In as much as theirs was a straightforward case, he'd merely need to know their full names and dates of birth.

Miss Marple had only given our Muses their first names, so they were unprepared when asked to expand upon these. In a short discussion among themselves, they agreed that they should all share the same surname, such that they could pass themselves off as sisters. As for what that surname might be, well they weren't at all sure what would constitute a good one.

They asked Mr Bright if he had any suggestions.

Hoping perhaps to elicit information about their origins, he noted that British surnames generally fall into one of four different categories – patronymic, characteristic, occupational and geographic.

Our Muses decided – in the language Mr Bright no longer understood – that patronymic made no sense for individuals who had no father, and occupational made no sense for individuals who had no occupation. The only major physical characteristic that they shared was that they were all men with mildly inappropriate female bodies, a circumstance they didn't care to highlight. This left only the geographic solution – either related to a place (like Scott) or to a feature (like Moore). They therefore went with where they came from: Bhrēwā. As I'm sure you are aware, this is Proto Indo-European for 'Bridge'.

Mr Bright was not aware, so agreed that Brewer was a sensible choice: not so uncommon as to sound contrived, but not so common as to sound made-up.

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As for ages, all they could say was that Cally was probably older than Tally, who was probably older than Cleo. Mr Bright said he'd ask the UKPPS for Cleo to be 21, Tally to be 23 and Cally to be 25.

He did not thereafter press them with a request to visit MI5·5 HQ for a little light questioning on Matters Dheghōm, deeming that it might be unwise to broach the subject again until the identity documents and associated paraphernalia had been provided.

Miss Marple appeared with the tea – a very nice Assam, because our Muses often materialise in India – and some Hobnobs. Her excellent ability to read people had enlightened her to the fact that Mr Bright would be partial to these particular biscuits, and she was not wrong.

So now you're reminded of how Mr Bright came to meet those whom the world knows as the Brewer sisters.

For the next part of our story, we must turn our attention to the disturbing events that catapulted these three young men on their disparate and unexpected adventures.



## Chapter 2

## The Disappearance of Friends

On Wednesday, the sixth of August, 2025, five individuals were in receipt of a text message purportedly sent by Susan Scott, David Scott's 84-year-old mother, but actually sent by his wife, Melanie Scott *née* Bailey.

The message the five individuals received read: "Reminder: keep the date clear, please!".

What it *read* was not, however, what it *said*.

One of its recipients, Duncan Bright, did not know what it said. He could tell it was something enigmatic, but as for what, well, he'd have to be patient to find out.

Mrs Scott didn't send the message directly to Mr Bright, of course, but you'll have guessed as much already. As David and Melanie had anticipated, he intercepted it; this is why its plain text revealed nothing.

One of the people who was sent the message directly was David himself. He would have known what it said had he been in a position to read it. He was not, however, in such a position, for had he been so he would have immediately sent a message of his own reading, "No – scrap that!".

The other three recipients of the message not only read it, but they were also aware of what it said. It bore disconcerting news.

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In response, Seth Scott, who is studying Advanced Computing at Imperial, arranged to meet one or both of Martin Søndergaard and Lillian Bang, the London-based external affairs officers for an ancient organisation with which his parents have a cordial relationship. This organisation keeps its name a secret, but Cleo disclosed it to me once. I can tell you what it is if you like.

You do like? Very well: in Latin, it's *Qui Timemus*; in English, "We Who Fear".

You can perhaps appreciate why they might wish to keep that to themselves.

Edith Scott, who is studying Artificial Intelligence at Edinburgh, did nothing except worry. Believe it or not, Boroughbridge is closer to Edinburgh than it is to London, and it would have fallen to Edith to drive home to investigate if she didn't hear by mid-day from the final person who received her mother's message: Miss Marple. Happily, Miss Marple was at the time in existence, so was able to send Edith a WhatsApp message reading "I shall run your errand for you."

Being elderly, Miss Marple is quite particular about the proper use of punctuation, and under no circumstances would she ever stoop to using an emoji.

Naturally, both the Scott twins remained very deeply concerned, for this hadn't ever happened before. They knew, however, that Miss Marple's sleuthing skills were far superior to their own, so

were content to leave the investigation into their parents' whereabouts in her capable hands.

After sending her WhatsApp message, Miss Marple got to work.

When she entered Cally's room, he was painting a still life while listening to a recording of Mozart's Clarinet concerto in A major, K. 622, so he wasn't immediately aware of her presence. He became so when she tapped him lightly on the shoulder and told him to put away his brushes and go to the living room while she collected the others.

Something important had come up.

Cally was playing *Crusader Kings III* on his PC, and while mildly exasperated by Miss Marple's clap of the hands, he nevertheless saved his game then proceeded dutifully to the rallying point.

Cleo was, as ever, reading a book: Vishnu Sharma's *Panchatantra*, in the original Sanskrit. Miss Marple knew from previous experience that it was next to impossible to break Cleo's concentration merely by making a noise or engaging in mild physical contact, so put a hand over a page to prise him out of the world of his imagination. "Come with me, dear", she said, so Cleo did.

Once Miss Marple had assembled her three housemates downstairs, she apprised them of the situation.

"I have received a rather disturbing message on my portable telephone", she began. She had, of course, learned by now that such devices were

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usually referred to simply as 'phones', but considered this reference to the Greek word for 'sound' to be inappropriate, given how they were all about what was on the screen.

"I didn't send it", said Tally.

Miss Marple ignored him. "The content of the message is immaterial. The arrival of it, however, is of some concern. It means that something ill has befallen our good friends, David and Melanie.

"It's a dead man's switch?" asked Cally. "Sent if someone doesn't log into Melanie's server to stop it?"

"Precisely. I'd have called it a dead man's *handle* myself, but yes. Because the Scott twins are both several hundred miles away, it is our responsibility to follow up on their behalf. There could be a perfectly innocent explanation for the message's transmission, but I rather suspect there isn't.

You know, of course, that Miss Marple's instincts were correct. Otherwise, this wouldn't be much of a story, would it?

"Should one of us stay here?" asked Tally. "It could be an elaborate ruse to lure us away."

Miss Marple sighed. "I'm afraid your game will simply have to wait. Now", she clapped her hands twice, "get yourselves ready quickly; we don't know that what has happened to the Scotts isn't still happening."

"Have you called them?" asked Tally, not about to give up on his desire to get back to conquering Europe.

"No", said Miss Marple. "I shall do, but not until we've paid their house a visit. David will also have received the distress message, and if he isn't in possession of his portable telephone then I don't want whoever is in charge of it to associate my call with the message it received. I shall therefore allow some time to elapse before attempting to get in touch."

Two minutes later, the group had their shoes on and their bags shouldered, ready to set off.

What's that? Make-up? Cally almost never wears it; Cleo only wears it when it's expected of him; Tally wears it at every opportunity, so was already fixed. Why are you interested in such things? Or why aren't you?

"Now I shouldn't have to repeat myself", said Miss Marple, about to repeat herself, "but please, please try to remember to use female pronouns for each other while we're out and about. It will spare you from a great deal of awkward questions, not to say unwanted gossip. You've been getting very slack recently. Both Cally and Tally slipped up in Morrisons, and I'm sure that the only reason Cleo didn't was because he didn't say anything."

"Even if we're speaking Bhéwonomese with the scrambler on?" asked Cally.

"I wouldn't go quite that far, although it would perhaps help to reinforce the habit." She tensed her brow in vexation. "I really don't understand why you find it so difficult; I myself have no trouble at all adapting to the context, it's not demanding."

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She opened the front door and gestured for our Muses to pass through.

Cleo went first, followed by Cally muttering something about how it took an act of will to think of the other two as female.

Tally stayed inside. "Wait a moment", he said, "I think I have an idea. Couldn't we use a thin translation screen to make the change for us? Can we do that?"

Everyone looked at Cleo, except of course for Cleo himself, who was considering the question.

"So you want to insert something that catches every use of he, him, his, his and himself when used by one of us with reference to one of us, and replace it with she, her, her, hers and herself?"

"That's what I was thinking, yes."

"And uses of masculine words such as boy, man and so on? And gender agreement for languages that need gender agreement?"

"If we can do that. Ideally, we'd also be able to toggle it on and off, in case we actually want to refer to each other properly for some reason."

Cleo frowned some, then announced, "I believe all that's possible, yes."

"Will we have to do it from Bhrēwā?" asked Cally. The implication was that if so, they'd have to go back into the house, out of sight, because it would entail dematerialisation.

"I hope not", said Tally. "It took me ten whole minutes to get my eye make-up right this morning."

"Perhaps you could be a hero and stoically endure the assault on your vanity", suggested Miss Marple, unimpressed.

"I'd have to do the toggle from Bhrēwā", said Cleo. "The rest, I can manage that from here."

"Then be a dear and manage it", said Miss Marple, looking at her watch. "The Scotts could be in trouble at this very moment; we shouldn't stand around dithering."

Cleo, as the most technically accomplished of our Muses, did the thing. I'll henceforth report their pronoun uses as they were heard, rather than as how they were said. As a bonus, you'll be able from this to tell when they're speaking English and when they're speaking what they call scrambled Bhéwonomese. You can thank me later.

I know, I know, it's going to be confusing, but – as you'll by now have gathered – that's so often the case with our Muses anyway.

Miss Marple was taller than her three companions, but because of her age was not as fast on her feet. She wasn't slow, however, and soon the group had reached the junction with Roecliffe Lane.

"Cally, dear", said Miss Marple, a mild irritation in her voice, "do try to adopt a more feminine gait, would you? If you persist with those long strides, people are sure to notice something's amiss. Look at Cleo, no-one would know he was a man by the way he walks – and *please* take your hands out of your pockets." She tutted to herself. "I should have

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put my foot down when you were looking at those jeans, I knew you'd do it."

"Why did you say to walk like Cleo and not like me?" asked Tally, indignantly. "Don't I have the girl walk mastered, or maybe mistressed, too?"

"The walk, yes, but you *will* keep inserting those little skips and jumps."

"They're fun!"

"They may well be fun, Tally, but were you to pay attention to how *actual* young women walk about town, instead of admiring their curves, you'd see none of them performing such manoeuvres. Keep them to a minimum, if you would."

"I do pay attention to actual young women!"

"To how they *walk*, Tally, not to how they *look*."

He sighed. "Yes, Miss Marple", he acceded.

Cleo smiled and stuck his tongue out at him.

"You don't have to take the female play-acting quite that far, Cleo", declared Miss Marple, brusquely.

Cleo lowered his head in embarrassment.

Upon arrival at the Scotts' residence, Miss Marple stopped at the gate.

"Now, look around. What do you notice?" she asked.

"No police?" ventured Cally.

"Very well observed", replied Miss Marple, heartened to think that Cally might possibly have listened on those occasions when she'd described her hobby to him. "What isn't there is often just as



important as what is. So, this would suggest that the burglar alarm wasn't tripped. Anything else?"

"Their MG3 isn't on the driveway", said Tally.

"Indeed. The distress message could therefore have gone out for a reason no more worrisome than the breaking-down of their car in a location with poor portable telephone coverage." She shook her head. "Sadly, that is not the case. I fear that our friends have been abducted."

Cally exchanged a puzzled glance with Tally.

"How do you know?", he asked.

"Melanie's phone is beneath that bush to the right", said Cleo.

"Well spotted." Miss Marple was pleased with his perceptiveness. "It's David's telephone, not Melanie's, but I grant you that it's hard to tell from here. Judging by where it lies, the impression is given that it was tossed out of the passenger window of a vehicle as it left the premises. Would you be a dear and fetch it, please?"

"Aren't you worried about smudging any fingerprints?" asked Cally.

"The hydrangea that it lies beneath is in the shade and still has dew on its leaves. The device would have struck these leaves when thrown. It did not, however, make its mark on them; therefore it was discarded before the dew was formed, so will itself be endowed. What fingerprints it might have borne will by now be spoiled."

Cleo retrieved the phone, which was indeed quite wet.

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"Can I just check – you *are* Miss Marple and not Sherlock Holmes?" asked Tally.

He wasn't expecting an answer and didn't receive one.

"It's been smashed", said Cleo. "The SD card is probably OK, but we'll need to see a specialist to access the internal memory."

Miss Marple took the phone and, wiping it down with a pristine handkerchief, examined it. "Broken over the knee, I should think", she said, before handing it back to Cleo, who put it in his bag. "Come, we should see what we can find inside the house."

I am assured by those accustomed to investigating dark forces that, ordinarily, it would not be a good idea to take hold of the front doorhandle of a building one is investigating, lest it be rigged with explosives or worse. Such investigators tend not, however, to be quite as invulnerable as Miss Marple and our Muses. If a blast were to kill one of them then they would all be transported to Bhrēwā, from where they could return unharmed at their leisure; if it were merely to injure one of them, well it would hurt, certainly, but should they wish a quick cure then an instant dematerialisation and rematerialisation would fix them up good as new.

So it was that, after checking the doorhandle for fingerprints and finding none, Miss Marple turned it.

This did not, of course, trigger any trap – as Miss Marple well knew it wouldn't. No-one careless enough to throw a mobile phone away into the bushes of the very house its owner lived in would have been patient enough to arrange a surprise to catch out the unwary first-responder. Miss Marple may be invulnerable, but she isn't reckless.

She had a key to the door, but it was unlocked anyway, so the four entered – vigilantly, because they had no idea what unearthly scenes might await them. Cleo went to turn off the alarms, but discovered that they weren't switched on anyway.

A brief survey of the house revealed nothing untoward except in one very important respect: the safe had been opened and the entirety of its contents removed.

"So, I believe what has happened is as follows", began Miss Marple. "Melanie and David were on one of their not-infrequent Matter-gathering trips when they were apprehended by persons unknown. Melanie was held hostage while David was driven back here and told to open the safe or Melanie would suffer unpleasant consequences. He was then driven away again, his portable telephone being destroyed in case it had the same location-sharing setting that you enabled on my own device – or, I suppose, its destruction could simply been out of spite for some perceived transgression."

"We should check the CCTV recordings", said Cally. "We'll need to go home to do that; phones are too fiddly."

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"Well before you do", said Miss Marple, looking at her watch, "let me first call Melanie. Could you establish one of your special connections should my call be answered, please? In unscrambled English, if you would."

Our Muses can communicate with Miss Marple, the Scotts and one another over any distance, but to do so they need to establish the conceit of a channel. They can achieve this using any functioning two-way audio device, such as a telephone, if they're cognisant of one in proximity to the recipient. This facility is what Miss Marple was requesting, but without the usual Bhéwonomese scrambling.

"If we can hear *them*, they can hear *us*", cautioned Cally.

"Quiet, then", instructed Miss Marple, before clearing her throat and tapping Melanie's number into her mobile.

It went to voice mail.

"Ah, hello Melanie, it's Jane. I wonder, might you be open to accompanying me on an excursion to York next week? I don't mind which day. No rush, get back to me when you're free. Goodbye."

She hung up.

Miss Marple never travels by car, so in the event that Melanie was actually free from danger or injury, this message would have informed her that she really *should* call Miss Marple at the first opportunity.

"That went to a server somewhere in Berkshire", said Cally.

"Newbury", added Cleo.

Cally was surprised. "How did you trace it so specifically?"

"I didn't, I looked up where the data centre is when we got our phones."

"Why would you – ?"

Miss Marple interrupted. "Focus, please. So, that little inquiry came to nothing, but we can try it again later, perhaps with one of you making the call under a sufficiently different-yet-plausible pretext to mine. Now, shall we return to base?"

"No, wait", said Tally. "David has a scrying device somewhere; we could use that to get a much better look at what happened than any camera would show."

"Where is it?" asked Cally.

"I don't know", replied Tally. "I only know he has one."

"What does it look like?" asked Miss Marple, steadying her voice to indicate that her patience was being tried.

"Well it's a solid gold disc about this wide and maybe this thick", said Tally.

"It's on the bookcase, underneath the blue glass vase with the sprigs of honesty in it", said Miss Marple, without looking. "Do pay attention when you're hunting for evidence, please."

Tally went over and retrieved it. "Gold is heavier than it looks", he noted – with enough

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enthusiasm to impart the impression that he thought he could do someone real damage by whacking them with it.

So, everything that happens in Dheghōm is automatically recorded. This information can be accessed directly from Bhéwonom by those who have the necessary privileges, but it can also be examined from within Dheghōm itself by means of a scrying device.

I'm assuming you know that your world, Dheghōm, is essentially a sub-world of Bhéwonom. To the people of Bhéwonom it's a game, like *World of Warcraft* is to you. You're a non-player character. Isn't *that* a blow to the ego?

Oh, and as a further aside, some of you may be wondering why our Muses can't simply conjure copies of certain items out of nothing, in the manner that visitors from Bhéwonom can do. Well, the fact is that they are not from Bhéwonom and so have no such ability; neither did they possess a scrying device to copy anyway until just now, when Tally picked up David's. This is at odds with what Cleo once implied when speaking to a particularly troublesome Bhéwonomese visitor, Blue, who incorrectly deduced that our Muses had used such a device to uncover his activities; rather, the three were (successfully, as it happened) preventing him from uncovering their own activities.

"It's keyed", said Tally as he walked over. "It has David's number on it."

"We can hammer it out", said Cally. "I remember where David keeps his tools."

"I rather suspected you might", murmured Miss Marple.

For some reason, probably as a security precaution but quite possibly merely by accident, every scrying disc bears a number written in Bhéwonomese script that identifies the single individual who can use it. Anything with the anatomy of a human being – including visitors from Bhéwonom – has such an identifier. No, no, don't bother looking for yours, you have to drink a certain kind of potion before you can see them, and even then they don't show up in mirrors. Someone else would have to tell you what yours is.

Someone else did indeed tell David and Melanie what theirs is, which means that either one of them can use their scrying device by simply hammering out the other's number (or, to be precise, the full stop *following* the number) then scratching in their own.

Even Miss Marple, who is a probe in human form, has such a number. If you could see it, and could read Bhéwonomese numerals (it isn't difficult), then you'd notice that it's different in appearance to almost everyone else's – but it is nevertheless present. Unfortunately she doesn't know what it is, and none of the people she knows knows either.

Our Muses also don't know their numbers, but that's because they *have* no numbers. This

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numberless condition is unprecedented, and were you to ask a Bhéwonomese programmer if it were even possible then they would surely answer in the negative. They would nevertheless be wrong. Our Muses are singularly uncounted – and they know it.

Because our Muses have no numbers, it follows that they can use any scrying disc if they hammer the existing number out of it and fail to replace it with a new one. Thus, when Cally returned from David's workshop looking through David's disc at the events that had occurred the day before, he knew that both Tally and Cleo (but not Miss Marple) would be able to peer over his shoulders and observe the same goings-on. Think of it as like watching a video on the same phone, except it's of the past, not the present.

"How do you turn on the sound?" he asked, spinning the disc between his fingers to see if that did anything.

"I don't think you can", answered Cleo. "It's only visual."

"Why wouldn't they include sound?"

"They're Bhéwonomese", replied Cleo. "It probably didn't occur to them."

"But audio is such an obvious – "

"Please", said Miss Marple, "look through it and tell me what transpired. I expect Tally to go off at a tangent at the slightest opportunity, but not you two."



Tally was at that moment daydreaming, so didn't complain about this slight. Miss Marple tapped him back into reality.

"Tell me whom you see", she instructed.

"Let me just fast-forward to the present", said Cally, "I might have gone too far back. I mean, there's no time-stamp. *No time stamp!* How could anyone not – "

"Cally!", said Miss Marple, sternly.

"Sorry, sorry, OK, I think I've got it. Tally, Cleo: gather round."

"They're wearing surgical masks", said Tally.

"Who are?" asked Miss Marple, really wishing that she didn't have to ask the question.

"The people with David."

"People? Can you describe them?"

"Well", said Tally, "age-wise, they range from perhaps in their early thirties to maybe their mid-forties. It's hard to tell, because of the masks."

"Are they male? Female?"

"Yes."

"Well which?"

"I don't know – I mean, they *look* male, but then we look female and we're not."

"Three men. That's a start."

"They're light-skinned", said Cleo, "like you and David. One of them, the oldest, has a double-barrelled shotgun. The youngest has a big knife of some kind; I think it's meant to look frightening, but I'm not sure it's practical."

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"Not for stabbing", added Tally, "the point is curved upwards. You could hack with it, though, it has a bladed edge. Hey, I wonder, –"

"No, Tally, you can't have one. They're almost certainly illegal."

"But he has one!" said Tally, pointing at the scrying device as if Miss Marple could see.

"He is a criminal. You are not. Now tell me how they're dressed."

"The one with the shotgun is wearing a flat cap", said Cally. "He has a moustache of the kind worn by cads in movies. He's got on a thick, tweed jacket."

"In August? Even at night, that's unusual. Carry on, please."

"The middle one is trying to dress casually", said Cleo, "but he can't help himself, he wants to be smart; he prides himself in his appearance. The youngest has very short hair and tattoos on the backs of his hands – move in a bit, Cally, thanks – they're of ... oh, they're letters. MU on one hand, FC on the other."

"I see. Is David wearing a mask?"

"No, only the three men people are", said Cally.

"Just call them men", said Miss Marple. "You can always correct yourself if you learn something different later."

"David looks as if he's dressed to meet someone or to dine out", said Cleo. "He's wearing a tie and seems smarter than usual."

"He often wears a tie", Cally remarked.

"Have you spotted him in that one before? I haven't."

"I'll see if I can get closer, I think it's linen."

"You're becoming distracted again", interrupted Miss Marple. "Now, before we continue, I have a question for you: can you lip-read?"

Cally shrugged, and looked at Cleo. "I don't know, can we?"

"What am I saying?" said Miss Marple, then mouthed a silent sentence.

Cleo shook his head. "I guess we –"

"The Tuesday Night Club", said Tally.

"What?" said (rather than asked) Cally.

"She said 'The Tuesday Night Club'", explained Tally.

"It was the name of the first short story in which I appeared", said Miss Marple. "It would appear that you can lip-read, Tally."

"Cool!"

If you think that Tally was feeling smug about this, you'd be right.

"How come you can do that?" asked Cleo, a little miffed that he couldn't.

"I've no idea, but I don't care because I can."

"How does it work?"

"It's a bit like when you're reading a book and can hear the words in your head. I hadn't really noticed before; I look at people's eyes when they're talking, not their mouths."

"The three men are wearing masks", said Miss Marple, bringing the conversation back on track,

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"but I'd be very interested to hear what David says."

"He's not saying anything at the moment", said Cally. "I'll speed it up a bit. They push him towards the safe, the machete man makes some kind of throat-slitting gesture, David isn't happy, the one with the shotgun points it at him –"

"He knows how to handle it", noted Tally.

"David kneels down and taps a number into the keypad – do you want to know what it is?"

"Not right now", said Miss Marple.

"He stands up, pulls the safe open and – er, over to you Tally."

"And he's like, 'See? I told you'." He winced. "Ooh, ouch!"

"The man with the knife just punched him in the gut", reported Cleo.

"The middle man, the one who isn't armed, he has a canvas bag", said Cally.

"I thought he might", commented Miss Marple, "although it would have been helpful if you'd mentioned the fact earlier."

"He's scooping all David's papers and things into it. David says – what does he say?"

He paused the scrying device then passed it to Tally, who moved it around to get a better look. "David says, 'No, stop, you don't know what you're doing'."

"That much is clear", murmured Miss Marple.

"The bag man must be shouting something, his mask is really stretching, then David is like 'No, it's

dangerous, really dangerous, there are people who will kill if they' – aaand David gets walloped again by the tattooed heavy."

He passed the scryer back to Cally.

"The man with the shotgun looks angry, he's pointing at David. Ooh, the man with the bag slaps him, that's got to smart, I think they want him to stop talking."

"Maybe they're worried there's some kind of Alexa around that he might use to call someone?" suggested Cleo.

"I think I've heard enough", said Miss Marple. "These are amateurs. The older man with the shotgun must have a licence for it, probably for shooting on the moors, he's not a farmer, not with a moustache like that. He owns a company dealing in the sale of uncut gems, but has fallen into debt. The man with the bag is a local agent of his whom David didn't approach for an appraisal, but who did get wind of it on the grapevine, most probably from the firm that David did engage; they would be sure to boast about it. He's as horrid and corrupt as his superior, and together the two cooked up a plan to rob David and Melanie of whatever gems yet remained to be sold. The tattooed gentleman with the knife is a part-time thug brought in from elsewhere: no-one in this part of the world supports Manchester United Football Club."

"I'm sure there are other possible explanations", said Cally, tentatively. Miss Marple did seem to

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have extrapolated considerably from what seemed to be scant evidence.

"We can rule out the paranormal, because David's abductors have no idea what the papers in David's safe concern; neither do they know why he doesn't have a voice-command device listening to his and Melanie's every word. The older man needs money, or he wouldn't be wearing unsuitable clothing. The man with the bag gives the impression that he lives a certain lifestyle beyond his means. Whatever they want, they believe to be in David's safe. The most likely conclusion is therefore that they are would-be jewel thieves. You're welcome to adopt a different hypothesis should one come to mind, but this is one is sufficient to get us started."

"So we're dealing with three men plus whoever is currently guarding Melanie", said Cally, thinking it over. "We'd better follow them, then. Can you go and bring round a car, Tally?"

Tally was excited to oblige, and left immediately.

"Shouldn't we call the police?" asked Cleo. "We'll be able to tell them the car's registration number when we look; they can handle it from there."

Cally shook his head. "If the police get hold of David's papers, they're sure to make their way to Mr Bright or Moore or whatever his name is."

"Mr Bright is unaware that David and Melanie have recreated them", Cleo explained, for the benefit of Miss Marple.

"Sarah's letters are indestructible", added Cally. "Can you imagine what would happen if that little detail were to reach the media?"

In case you didn't know, Sarah is a young – well, youngish – woman of Bhéwonom. She caused some documents to be placed in David's safe, which – because they belong to her – cannot be damaged in any way. They can't even be folded. She *could* damage them herself, but I don't know if Dheghōm's programmers can; I think it may be against Bhéwonomese law for them to do so.

"David said that the documents were dangerous", noted Miss Marple. "Would I be correct in assuming that he was somewhat concerned about what Mr Søndergaard and Miss Bang might do were they to learn that such a cache of evidence was out in the wild?"

"That was my understanding, yes", said Cally.

"Then we must at the very least strive to recover the documents before involving the authorities. I shall have to leave that to you, I'm afraid."

As I indicated earlier, Miss Marple doesn't travel by vehicle of any kind: she walks everywhere. This is because – as I also indicated earlier – when she rematerialises after a dematerialisation, she does so in the same location from which she dematerialised. If she were to dematerialise while in a moving vehicle, that could have grave consequences were she to rematerialise not in one. For long-distance travel, she waits at

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home for one of our Muses (usually Cleo) to come and fetch her. Any of our Muses can teleport Miss Marple with them to any of the ancient sites in their network, although that does require that such a site is present near to where she needs to be.

"OK", said Cally. "I'm not completely sure how we're going to deal with one man wielding a shotgun and another wielding Man U tattoos and a zombie knife, but we shall do our best."

"For my part, I shall potter around here for a while longer to see if we've overlooked anything, then lock the place up and make my way home. I have my portable telephone with me, so we can keep each other abreast of any new developments. I shall nevertheless accompany you outside, however, because I'm curious to know whether the thieves arrived in a BMW or a Range Rover."

The three went out onto the drive, where Cally turned the scrying device to bring up an image of David's abductors pushing him towards their car.

"They reversed it in", said Cally. "It's a BMW, registration MAH 18. I guess that means its owner is the eighteenth-richest person in the country with initials MAH."

"It's a false plate", said Cleo. "It's much cleaner than the rest of the car. Check the one at the front, to make sure."

"The car belongs to the man with the bag", said Miss Marple, "bought using a contract purchase agreement, I shouldn't doubt. Good, I was hoping it



wouldn't be the older man's Range Rover; you might have had to follow that over rough terrain."

"The front plate is also too clean", said Cally, "but I'm left wondering why, if he wanted to use a false registration number, he would have chosen something like MAH 18."

"Oh, probably to impress a woman", said Miss Marple, dismissively. "Melanie's captor is likely his long-suffering girlfriend, initials MAH, whom he first met in 2018."

"I'll let the recording run a little while we wait for Tally", said Cally, tapping the scrying device to unpause it. "So here they come with David, the bag goes in the boot then the guy who had it gets into the driving seat and starts the engine. The one with the shotgun sits next to him – ha, he's riding shotgun, they always do that – then, er, now what's this? David has slid a hand into a pocket and the hired muscle takes exception to it. Oh, it's his phone! He must have been trying to use the emergency call feature before they tied him up or something. Anyway, the big guy wrestles it off him then gut-punches him again – ooh, David did not like that – after which he snaps the phone on his knee. Then, he bundles David into the car behind the driver and strides cockily round the back to his own seat. He hands the broken phone to the shotgun person."

"Why is he pointing the shotgun at David's legs?" asked Cleo.

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"To show that he doesn't intend to kill, but that were David to make a break for it then he would certainly be prepared to wound", said Miss Marple. "He's a very unpleasant character."

Cally moved to where, had the BMW actually been there, he'd have been inside it. "The knife person is using cable ties on David's wrists, some kind of makeshift handcuffs. The car moves off – oh, there goes the phone out of the window – and they turn right onto Roecliffe Lane. The driver floors it, and now we have to wait for Tally to appear so we can follow."

"I believe I hear him now", said Miss Marple.

All our Muses are able to drive, and – thanks to Mr Bright – all have valid driving licences. Nevertheless, when travelling as a group, Cally always takes the wheel. Cleo doesn't like being the driver, and neither he nor Cally likes Tally being the driver. Tally, you see, while not being what you might call an aggressive motorist, does exhibit a rather more carefree attitude to road safety than most of the UK population would consider safe. This is how Miss Marple was able to identify that it was he who was approaching, from the noise made by excessively high engine revolutions being used to gain power in too-low a gear.

Tally screeched the car – a Mercedes-Benz AMG A45 S Plus – to a halt, then turned off the engine and got out, smiling.

The others joined him on the footpath.

"You picked the yellow one?" Cally wasn't entirely elated with Tally's choice.

Our Muses keep three cars, so that if they have to abandon one or two, they always have a spare.

"It does zero to a hundred kilometres in under four seconds", said Tally. "I thought we might need some speed."

"It's me who'll be driving, not you!"

"Ah, yes, now I thought of that." He opened the passenger door and removed some shoes. "Here, I brought you some of your flats." He held them out.

Cally wasn't close to being as grateful as Tally had envisaged he would be. "No, no, I *like* those! If we have to disappear, they'll be left behind!"

"Give them to me if you prefer to drive in heels", said Miss Marple, coldly. "I do wish you'd direct your attention to the rather serious matter at hand."

"Yes, yes, sorry Miss Marple", said Cally, handing Tally the scrying device then swapping his footwear. "If you could take my Pavers, Miss Marple; I've worn them in, and I don't want to lose those too."

Frostily, Miss Marple accepted the request.

Tally sat in the passenger seat, with Cleo behind him. Cally admired his shoes, then got into the driving seat and adjusted the set-up.

Miss Marple watched impassively, but managed a worried smile as she waved them on their way. If only she could have gone with them.

## **Bhrēwā**

You might be wondering why Miss Marple might ever dematerialise in a moving vehicle. Well, sometimes one of our Muses needs to disappear at short notice, entailing the simultaneous disappearance of our other two Muses along with Miss Marple without warning.

I also refer you to my earlier comment on Tally's driving.

## Chapter 3

## Murderous Acts in Ivy Cottage

The vehicle that our Muses were following, albeit half a day behind it, had gone south for six miles before turning north onto the Great North Road, or the A1(M) as this stretch was now known.

"They're taking the left lane", said Tally, "heading towards Thirsk."

Cally had to brake to slide into a gap in the traffic. "Couldn't you have told me earlier?"

"It's a BMW!" protested Tally. "BMW drivers don't use indicators."

"They don't use satnavs, either", said Cally. "If they'd taken the A168 directly, they'd have got here five or ten minutes earlier."

"They were speeding", said Tally. "I keep having to skip ahead a few seconds to keep up."

Cleo, who had been messing about with his phone in the back, put it to his ear.

Cally noticed in the mirror. "What's that you're doing, Cleo?"

Cleo held up a finger, to show that he was listening to something, then stopped and tapped the screen a few times. "I was wondering where David and Melanie might have been going. It seemed unlikely that they'd have been abducted out in the open, so I reasoned they must have been lured somewhere. David and Melanie record all

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their calls, and OK, maybe the thieves could have rung Melanie or the house phone, but I thought I'd put the SIM card from David's phone into my phone to see if there was a recording on it."

"Liar", accused Tally, laughing. "You just looked at the SIM card to see what was on it, and found an MP3! You did none of that reasoning stuff."

Cleo blushed. "Well, whatever: you need to hear this.

He played the recording out loud.

Ooh! Shall I write this as if it were a BBC radio script?

I think you know the answer.

1 1. INT. DAVID'S STUDY.  
2 3.15 P.M.  
3 (DAVID ANSWERS HIS MOBILE.)  
DAVID 4 Hello, David Scott.  
CALLER 5 Hi, my name, it's Miranda.  
6 Listen, we need to talk. I  
7 know how you source your  
8 rubies.  
DAVID 9 We're talking now.  
CALLER 10 No, no, it isn't safe - I'm  
11 having to call from a phone  
12 box. Meet me tonight at my,  
13 at Ivy Cottage, Helmsley,  
14 Postcode YO62 5AE. Got that?  
DAVID 15 Ivy Cottage, YO62 5AE. What  
16 time?  
CALLER 17 After dark. 10 P.M.?  
DAVID 18 10 P.M.? Couldn't we -  
CALLER 19 Oh, and bring your wife.

20 Sorry, I have to go now.

21 (CALLER HANGS UP.)

"She sounded nervous", said Cally.

Tally nodded. "All the same, it's clearly a trap."

"Well it's clearly one now that we know they held Melanie hostage and made David open the safe", countered Cally. "It could have been genuine for all David knew."

"He does go on a lot of wild goose chases", granted Cleo. "Do you think she *did* know how he sourced his rubies? About us, I mean?"

"No", said Cally, "she was too coy about it. She'd have alluded to us if she had any suspicions, 'your naked friends', something like that."

"I'll call Miss Marple", said Cleo. "At least we know where we're going now."

"Unless they were waylaid before they got there", said Tally. "Still a good idea to call her, though."

Cleo did so. The only immediate insight the elderly lady could offer was that David and Melanie would both have been suspicious and may have taken precautions. "Such a pity that said precautions did not extend to telling us their plans."

When they arrived at Ivy Cottage, well, they didn't: one side of the street was completely cordoned off, with police directing traffic along the other.

"This looks bad", said Cally.

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Tally pointed. "There's a TV crew."

Cally joined the queue of vehicles waiting to go past. "We can't stop here, we'll have to keep going. There's a country lane half a mile ahead, we'll turn around there then come back and find somewhere to park in the village."

"It's Ivy Cottage", said Cleo. "I can see the sign. It looks ... oh, it's surely false, it's just a piece of laminated A4."

"I don't like this at all", said Tally, voicing what our other two Muses also felt.

Once they'd navigated through the hold-up, Cally turned the car round at the entrance to the country lane, which turned out to have huge iron gates across it so wasn't quite the open road he'd been expecting. He drove back towards the cottage and joined the line of traffic heading in the other direction.

A police officer came over and tapped on the passenger window. Tally opened it and smiled.

"Is there a problem, officer?" he asked.

"Excuse me", the officer replied – he didn't look much older than our Muses, although of course he was much, much younger – "but didn't I spot you driving past in the other direction a few minutes ago?"

"This is what comes of choosing the yellow car", muttered Cally.

"Yes, officer", replied Tally, tilting his head down and looking up at the officer in a manner calculated to appear shyly seductive. "We were



heading for Rievaulx Abbey but saw that something was going on here so we thought we'd turn around and come back for a gawp. It's a little naughty of us, I know."

"There's nothing to see", said the officer. "It all went down inside. Do you have any ID?"

"Er, yes. Am I obliged to show you it?"

"No, but sometimes murderers return to the scene of the crime, so we like to check out anyone we register more than once."

"Just show him your driving licence, Tally", said Cally, eyes straight ahead as he tried to control his discomfort.

"Yes, oh, er, yes, sorry! Here you are officer", gushed Tally, producing his driving licence from his purse. "You say there's been a murder?"

"Three murders, shotguns by the look of it." He inspected Tally's licence carefully.

"Goodness! Do their families know?"

"Relatives of all three men have been informed, yes. Watch the TV news if you want to know more, I'm not part of the investigation myself." He handed Tally's driving licence back, "Thank you, Miss Brewer, everything seems in order. I won't stop you again when you've had your gawp and head back to Rievaulx."

"Thank you, officer", said Tally, beaming his most dazzling smile. "I think we'll stop in town for an early lunch first, though."

The officer stepped back and the traffic started to move again.

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"Did you *have* to flirt with that policeman?" asked Cally. "I could barely stop myself from outwardly cringing."

"I'm not sure I *did* stop myself", said Cleo. "That was so embarrassing."

"You're just envious because you're not as pretty as me", declared Tally, flapping his hand in a very faux-feminine way.

"You've been practising", said Cally, darkly.

They found a spot to park in the Market Place, which, this not being a Friday, was unoccupied by a market. The time was around 11:30, so they decided that lunch could wait.

Helmsley is a quaint Yorkshire market town, the buildings in its centre being constructed of a gorgeous, honey-coloured stone, the whole presenting a charming, picturesque scene. The market square is dominated by a spired, fifteen-metre tall monument to William Duncombe, second Baron Feversham, of whom few people would have heard if there wasn't a spired, fifteen-metre tall monument to him in Helmsley Market Place.

Actually, the square is dominated by the rows and rows of cars that are parked in it most days. I thought I should mention this, so you don't infer that I'm in the pay of the North York Moors National Park Authority. They're not very happy with me, but that's an entirely different story that I shan't be relating here.

Our three Muses found a bench to sit on just off the High Street, opposite the Feversham Arms Hotel. Yes, the Feversham family's historical connection with Helmsley runs deep. Tally chose the spot because it was a three-minute walk from the market square and a two-minute walk from Ivy Cottage; from there, he could use the scrying device to look back in time to see if he could spot David and Melanie's MG3 going past the previous evening.

A young woman holding up a solid gold disc 160mm in diameter and staring into it is perhaps not something one sees every day, but Yorkshire folk keep themselves to themselves, so no-one bothered him.

With Tally absorbed in snooping on the past, the conversation that followed was mainly between Cally and Cleo.

"Three bodies", began Cally. "all men."

"At least we know Melanie might be safe", said Cleo, trying to sound upbeat.

"One of the bodies could be David's, but if the families have been informed then surely Seth and Edith would have called Miss Marple."

"We should contact her ourselves, we need to update her." Cleo got out his phone.

"There was a Range Rover and a BMW in the Ivy Cottage driveway, but I didn't see the Scotts' MG."

"Hello? Miss Marple? It's Cleo."

"Ah, hello Cleo, I thought you might be getting in touch again."

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Cleo put his phone away. Once the connection had been established, the conceit of a phone call was unnecessary. "We tracked the BMW to Ivy Cottage, although that's not its real name, we can check it later on Google maps. It's – "

"The police had the place sealed off", interrupted Cally, getting to the point. "Three men were found shot dead inside. The Range Rover and BMW are outside but the Scotts' MG3 is missing."

"We're guessing that David wasn't among the dead, but we don't know his or Melanie's whereabouts", added Cleo. "The police could be holding them in custody."

"I see", said Miss Marple. "Let me consider this awhile. Cleo, you're most similar to Melanie in how you think: what would you have done in her position, held at gunpoint in a strange house by a jittery woman?"

"Well, let me see", said Cleo, mulling it over. "I would have known that the only reason I was alive was because the three men hadn't returned yet. When they did, they'd take David and I out onto the moors and shoot us. I would also know that they wouldn't return with the gems, because David would open the safe and the gems aren't in the safe, they're in a biscuit tin in the attic."

"So what would you have done?" asked Cally. "Sat it out?"

"No", said Cleo. "If I went along with everything meekly, I'd surely wind up dead in the end

whatever happened. They wouldn't want me giving evidence against them."

"Then..?"

Miss Marple's attempt to coax an idea from Cleo bore fruit. "Then ... I'd have worked on my captor – Miranda, as she called herself. I'd have told her that her self-obsessed boyfriend was playing her for a fool, that he had no intention of splitting the loot with her because he's a prick – excuse my language – and that she'd be as dead as me and David if she let him get away with it. I'd try to cajole her into talking about him, encouraging her to see all his bad points, of which I'm sure she'd be able to bring to mind many, and assert that if I was right then she'd know because he'd return claiming that the safe didn't have any gems in it. I'd insist that there were rubies, diamonds and a star sapphire the size of a golf ball in there. If he came in swearing that he was empty-handed, she'd know he was going to cut her out of the deal and that the man with the knife would be gutting her moments later."

Miss Marple paused. "I'm not persuaded that you'd have had the strength of character to pursue that line of action yourself", she said, "but Melanie certainly would have. Let's suppose you're right: how would it have unfolded?"

"Miranda would have had to shoot the person with the shotgun first", said Cally, "because if she shot the knife man first then she'd have been shot

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herself. Then, she'd have had to shoot the knife man, because, well, he had a knife."

"She'd have reloaded after that and chased after her boyfriend, then given him both barrels in the back as he ran", added Cleo.

"In the front", submitted Miss Marple. "He would have broken and been on his knees, pleading for mercy. Those kind of men are always cowards."

"Then", said Cally, "She would have reloaded again and killed David and Melanie."

"Except we know she didn't", added Cleo.

"There's also the question of what happened to David's papers."

Miss Marple's curiosity was now fully aroused. "That is a situation that defies explanation", she said. "We are obviously missing one or more vital pieces of information."

"Or Cleo's idea of what Melanie would have done could be miles away from the reality."

"Gunfire attracts attention", said Miss Marple. "Miranda would have wished to flee with great expediency. Rather than rifling the pockets of two gory bodies, she would have taken David's key – if she didn't have it already – and driven off in the MG3."

"Or David and Melanie overpowered her and drove her away themselves", proposed Cally.

"David's hands were bound", said Miss Marple. "I would expect that Melanie's were, too."

"Then what happened?" asked Cally.

"To answer that question", said Miss Marple, "I fear you will need to gather more facts. I shall leave you to it: do let me know if you uncover anything interesting."

She broke the connection.

"Rievaulx Abbey is nearby", said Cleo. "Is there an arrival point there?"

"I don't think so", said Cally, "we can't bring Miss Marple over, if that's what you were thinking."

"This is heavy", said Tally, lowering the scrying device to give his arms a rest. "It's like holding two bags of sugar."

"We've just finished talking to Miss Marple", said Cleo.

"Yes, I was listening. I'd love to think your scenario about Melanie winding up Miranda described the reality, but if you follow it through it has an ending that doesn't fit what we know."

"Do you have a better suggestion?" asked Cleo, a little affronted by the second dismissal of his idea in as many minutes.

"No, but that doesn't mean yours is correct", replied Tally.

"Stop bickering, you two", said Cally, with growing annoyance. "Tally, did you find anything on the scryer while you were 'listening' to our conversation with Miss Marple?"

"Almost", said Tally. "I have the car here on the screen, going past at around a quarter to ten or so last night on the way to Ivy Cottage."

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"What use is that?" asked Cally.

"None from where we're sitting, but if I could get a closer look it might tell us something."

"What?"

"I think Melanie is wearing a tie."

Melanie, you need to understand, hasn't greatly changed her wardrobe since her PhD days, except for when she was pregnant with Seth and Edith. Basically, she invariably wears some combination of a plain, long-sleeved blouse and trousers, with an assortment of different-gauge coats appropriate for whatever weather prevails. Ties do not figure at all in her fashion statements.

"That ... is unusual", said Cleo.

Cally thought it strange, too. "Well you can't step out into the road for a closer look, not where there's moving traffic."

"I could do it in the queue to get past Ivy Cottage, it starts like a minute's walk away."

"That's a possibility", said Cleo. "Maybe you should stay here, though, and give one of us the scryer. The policeman we met earlier is sure to recognise you, you know, given how pretty you are." He smiled, sweetly.

Tally glowered, although he knew that Cleo was right; he rose to his feet and surrendered him the device. "I'll be checking out the local shops, they can't all be as twee as they look", he said, "or maybe finding a half-decent place to eat."

Our Muses can eradicate any hunger pangs simply by returning to Bhrēwā. This is generally



inconvenient, however, and besides, they rather like food, not having been exposed to it when they didn't have bodies.

"We'll try not to be long", said Cally. "You have a set of car keys?"

Tally patted his bag.

Cally and Cleo departed for Ivy Cottage.

When they arrived, there were more news crews present and eight or nine vehicles queueing to be allowed past. Cleo decided to wait until the current batch had cleared and a new line started, because that would give him longer to find a suitable place to stand. The scrying device looks back in time, but not in space: what you see is what you would have seen were you there when the image depicted was the present. As with a magnifying glass, there's no remote viewing.

"We're going to look really stupid stepping out between vehicles and gazing into a golden disc", said Cleo.

"People will think it's a mirror", replied Cally.

"In what way will that stop us from looking really stupid?"

"We won't have to do it for long, don't worry, we just need a good look at Melanie's tie. I have a feeling it's going to match David's."

"What if a policeman comes over to ask what we're doing? We won't have Tally here to hit on him."

"Hopefully, it won't be necessary. If it happens, we'll just have to improvise."

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"You will", said Cleo. "I'll be too mortified to contribute. Now, just a moment, let me move this image on a tad."

He turned the scrying disc a little to the right, to advance it by a few seconds.

Cally looked into the disc, then back to the present. "A tiny bit more, where it is would put us inside that Ford Focus."

"It's not easy", said Cleo, tapping the device to unpause it, then a split-second later tapping again to pause it once more.

"That'll do it, I think", said Cally. "Right, let's have a look at Melanie's tie."

There was a space of about a metre between the Focus and the Mitsubishi Outlander in front of it. Somewhat apprehensively, Cleo stepped into the gap and smiled timidly at the woman in the Focus; Cally followed, merely acknowledging the driver with the standard kind of wave he used when thanking a driver for giving way.

"So that's David's tie", said Cally as they walked past where, fourteen hours or so ago, David had been at the wheel.

"And Melanie's is the same", added Cleo.

"Can you get a bit closer? I want to see what the material is exactly. It's not silk."

Cleo lowered the scryer. "We can do that back at their house. Right now, we're standing in the middle of a line of traffic where twenty police officers can see us, and we're acting so suspiciously

that I'm dying inside with worry that one's going to come over and arrest us for being bonkers."

"OK", said Cally, "your ordeal is over. Let's get back to the car and plan our next move with Tally."

"Thank you", said Cleo, pushing past him to get back onto the footpath as quickly as possible."

"Can I help you?" asked a voice.

Cleo found himself facing the chest of a policeman, and looked up.

It was the same officer who had stopped them at the other side of the cordon when they were in their car.

"No thanks, we're good", said Cleo, moving to get past him.

He interposed himself. "Weren't you with Miss Brewer in the yellow Merc about half an hour ago?"

Cleo pushed up his glasses. "Er, that was us, yes."

"She's our sister", said Cally, taking control.

See how I reported that as 'she'? I told you I would when our Muses spoke English to someone.

"What were you doing just now with that piece of metal?"

"It's for following ley lines", said Cally, deadpan. "We thought there was one in the road there, but there wasn't."

"How does it work?"

"It picks up on Earth energies."

"Right ... can you show me?"

"No", said Cally, "because we thought there was one there but there wasn't."

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Conceding that while he wasn't dealing with people who had a conventional worldview, Cally and Cleo were nevertheless harmless, the officer stepped aside."

"To Rievaulx!" declared Cally, then laughed.

Cleo laughed too, but more from nervous relief than humour.

They set off back to the market square.

"That was close", said Cleo. "Where did he come from? I didn't see him until he was right there in front of me."

"I think he was obscured by the SUV, he didn't substantiate from out of nowhere."

"That was a good excuse you came up with, about ley lines."

"Thanks – I surprised myself, to be honest. I aimed for peculiar yet not dangerous, and that's what came out." He laughed again.

Cleo smiled. "I see Tally's not at the bench."

"He'll be waiting in the car, I bet, playing something on his Nintendo Switch."

Three minutes later, as they approached, they saw that Tally wasn't inside the car. Rather, he was leaning against the passenger door.

"Looks as if you've lost your bet", said Cleo, waving.

Tally didn't wave back, on account of how his attention was directed towards a good-looking young woman who had just walked by him.

"Dammit, Tally", muttered Cally. "Miss Marple has told him off for that a dozen times – more than a dozen."

"He's a man, what do you expect?" said Cleo.

"So are we, but we don't scope girls in full view of the general public."

"Women do", said Cleo, "I've noticed them checking out the competition. It's – "

He stopped in a mixture of shock and horror.

"You felt that?"

"Someone's coming through!"

"Cally! Cleo!" shouted Tally in alarm.

"We have to go back", said Cally. "Shit shit shit shit!" He started running for the car.

"We can't, not right now!" protested Cleo. "I have a scrying disc!" He set off running, too.

Tally was now inside the vehicle, calling Miss Marple to let her know she was about to dematerialise.

Cally arrived before Cleo and opened the tailgate. "Give me that", he ordered, gesturing for the scryer.

Cleo thrust it towards him. Cally took it, and slipped under the false floor to where the tyre-inflation kit lived. He slammed the hatch shut and clambered into the back seat through the door that Cleo, now inside, had left open for him.

Hastily, he closed it after himself.

"Ready, Tally?" he asked.

Tally answered by activating the central locking system.

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Three sets of clothes and a pair of spectacles fell empty onto the seats.

## Chapter 4

### A Brief Discussion in Bhrēwā

"Do we know who it is?" asked Cally.

"Marius", replied Tally.

"He entered at point 22", added Cleo. "He's now at point 293."

"Is anyone following?"

"No", answered Tally.

"It's just Marius", confirmed Cleo.

"Then we'll return to Dheghōm. I'll fire up Miss Marple."

## Chapter 5

### Three Tasks for Three Muses

"Sorry about that, Miss Marple", said Cally, with genuine contrition.

"That's quite alright, dear", she replied. "Now put some clothes on and tell me all about it."

Our Muses scampered upstairs to their rooms, with Miss Marple following regally in order to continue the conversation from the landing.

"You weren't long at all", she said. "My tea is still quite hot enough to drink."

"Marius has come through from Dheghōm", said Cally. "That isn't supposed to be allowed."

"I thought you could stop that kind of thing."

"We can", said Tally, "indefinitely, but only from Bhrēwā."

"293 is the Devil's Quoits", said Cleo.

Quoits, arrows. I do wish the devil would stop throwing standing stones at innocent fields.

"He's here to see his daughter", explained Cally.

"Miss Ellis?", checked Miss Marple.

"No – well, yes, she is a Miss Ellis, but that's what we normally call her mother, Alice Ellis.

Marius's daughter's name is Love."

"She is the untalented poet, though?"

Cally laughed. "Yes, but she's better than I am so she could be worse."



"I quite like her poetry", said Cleo. "It's all about the performance."

Tally remained uncharacteristically silent.

A hastily dressed Cally stepped out onto the landing. "We're going to have to call on Marius; we need to find out why he's here – I mean, we know it'll be to speak to his daughter, but why does he want to speak to her right now and how come he's allowed to anyway?"

"It could be bad", called Tally, "very, very bad. If they – Bhéwonom's judges – have let him in, that suggests they don't think his presence will matter."

Cally was putting his hair up using the full-length mirror – you know the one, it hangs on the wall between his room and Tally's. "Surely they'd open the floodgates and let everyone in if they were going to close Dheghōm down."

Cleo appeared, hairbrush in hand. "Marius is super-smart by Bhéwonom standards; he may have been able to convince the judges that he *had* to be able to enter so he could offer Love a trip to his reality."

"They have a robot they can use", Cally clarified, for the benefit of Miss Marple. "Come to think of it, Marius might be a judge himself by now, for all we know." He yielded the mirror to Cleo.

"Don't forget David and Melanie", Miss Marple reminded them.

"They're the most important, yes – and we need to recover their papers, too", added Cally. "That

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means we'll have to go after Miranda or whatever her real name is."

"Isn't there a danger that Marius manages to speak to his daughter then return to his home before you can reach him?" asked Miss Marple.

"No", replied Cally. "What we know that he doesn't is that his daughter lives in Tenerife now, not Oxfordshire."

"The significance of this being..?"

"There are no entry points in Tenerife", said Cleo. "He can't teleport there. What's more, he has no money and no passport, so he can't fly there, either. We probably have an hour or two to find him, before he gives up and logs off."

Cally poked his head round Tally's door. "Come on, slowcoach! We have to get going."

"Ready", said Tally, emerging.

"You're wearing a dress", said Cally. He was not impressed.

"It's August, it's warm out."

"Dresses are impractical!"

"Miss Marple's wearing one. Well, a skirt – half of one."

"Miss Marple is unlikely to climb over a barbed-wire fence or jump from a height or crawl along the ground. She won't get her skirt trapped in any car doors, either."

"That was my first time in one!" protested Tally. "I know the right way to sit now." He glanced towards Cleo for support, then frowned. "Not wearing your specs, Cleo?"

"I'm getting low on them", Cleo replied. "I have a pair downstairs, I'll put them on before we leave."

"You look cute without – "

"Gentlemen!" said Miss Marple, sternly, clapping her hands to get their attention. "It seems that we have three tasks that need equally urgent attention, and three Muses to perform them. Tally: seek out Marius of Bhéwonom and find out why he has permission to visit this world. Cally: take a taxi to Helmsley and recover your vehicle, then use your magical golden disc to track down the missing Miss MAH. She knows what happened to David and Melanie, and could well have their papers, too. Don't forget the spare keys for the Mercedes."

"Is Cleo coming with me?" asked Cally.

"No, Cleo is going to the British Library. Before I left the Scotts, I had a quick look at the writings that David keeps in the loft. Don't look at me like that, Cally, I'm perfectly capable of ascending a loft ladder."

"Sorry, Miss Marple."

"Indeed. Anyway, among the more recent documents were notes concerning a number of folk tales contained in manuscripts from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Cleo is best-suited to read them, I feel."

Cleo himself felt best-suited to read them, but not best-suited to presenting himself at the British Library and requesting access. "You need to book visits at least 48 hours in advance", he warned, "so

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they can retrieve the works from storage and make sure that you're qualified and not likely to ruin them."

"They may have been digitised – is that the word?", said Miss Marple. "Or they could have been available on site. David didn't have to wait long to see them."

"He's a publisher, though, he has a plausible reason as to why he'd want to see them. I'm not even registered, I'd need permission to – "

"Cleo, Cleo, please calm down. I know you're uneasy about this kind of thing, so I propose that you ask Mr Bright to arrange access for you. He rather enjoys flexing his metaphorical muscles; I'm sure he'll comply."

Tally checked his phone. "Marius has a fifteen-minute start, I'll take a bike." With that, he scurried down the staircase and headed for the garage.

Although our Muses can take nothing with them to and from Bhrēwā, they're able to teleport with most things they can carry. So: a car, no; a bicycle, yes.

"I'll call a cab", said Cally, who didn't trust Ubers after a bad experience with one in Scarborough.

"I'll be heading for London?" asked Cleo, apprehensively.

None of our Muses like travelling to London, because materialising there out of the view of eyes and CCTV cameras is not at all easy.

"No, you'll be visiting the British Library reading room at Boston Spa, just outside

Wetherby. That's where David went. Three quarters of the library's collection is there."

Cally, a finger now in his ear to cut out Miss Marple's conversation with Cleo, was slowly descending the stairs while speaking to a dispatcher.

So, our three undaunted Muses were splitting up, to perform their investigations in parallel. How should I describe their adventures?

I think I'll present them as three separate chapters, but allow you to read them in whichever order you wish. Roll a die to decide, if you're unsure, or simply take them in the order they're presented; I appreciate that you could be *far* too busy to invest time in choosing for yourself.

## Chapter 6

### In which Tally is Curious

The gowned figure was walking along the grass verge no more than fifty metres from the Ellis family home at Stanton Harcourt when Tally spotted him. He overtook the man, dismounted, and turned around with a smile.

"Hello, Marius!" he said, cheerfully. "I'm sorry, but there's no-one home."

He said it in Bhéwonomese.

Marius stopped in front of him.

"You shouldn't be here", he said.

"Neither should you, but" – at this point Tally giggled – "here we are."

"Who are you and how did you get here?" asked Marius, warily.

"My name's Tally, and I'm a Muse."

"A Muse?" He frowned, but with fleck of admiration that Tally noticed. "The authorities have been looking for you for some time."

Tally shrugged a shoulder. "We're good at hiding, but I've elected to show myself to you today because we're just a *little* bit worried that your presence does not bode well for Dheghōm."

"You've told me who you are, but not yet how you got here."

"I shan't be doing so, either. Sorry!"

"Your accent isn't very pronounced. Are you from Northern Capital?"

Tally shook his head, sighing. "I don't mean to be rude, Marius, but you need to know that I'm as clever as you are, if not cleverer. Treat me as an equal and we'll get along just fine; try to trick me into revealing information that you could use to locate me and we can't really be friends."

"So what exactly is it that you want?"

Tally reassumed his cheery demeanour. "Well, we know you're here for two reasons. The first reason is to see your daughter, Love. The second reason is the cause of the first reason. We'd like to know this second reason."

"Why should I tell you?"

"Let's go to the cottage", suggested Tally. "You'll want to see for yourself that Love isn't there."

Marius nodded, and the two began to walk towards it, Tally pushing his bike by the handlebars, using its frame to separate him from Marius.

Well, it would have been unseemly for a young woman and a young man to be openly fraternising in the Oxfordshire countryside.

"I believe the place is empty", said Tally, "although there could be – oh, Airbnb isn't a thing in Bhéwonom. It's possible that it's occupied, but by guests who don't know the Ellises."

"Where can I find my daughter?"

"Well that's the thing. She's currently living on a semi-tropical island that doesn't have an access

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point. I suppose she's concerned that visitors from Bhéwonom might be reallocated in, some of whom will try to kill her for laughs. As for her mother, the artist, well at present she's in Tuscany; there are several favourable access points there, but alas, we don't know whereabouts in Tuscany she might be."

Marius looked disappointed rather than angry. "That's a pity, but I knew there might be problems. Very well, if their home is indeed vacant then I shall bid you farewell and – "

"No, no no – !" said Tally, hastily. "No, we can phone your daughter and you can speak to her right now. Do you have her mobile number? Or her mother's, come to that?"

He had to use English for some of this, because there's no word in Bhéwonomesese for either 'phone' or 'mobile'.

"If you need a key to contact either one of them, I'm sad to report that I know none."

"Oh. Well in that case, one of us Muses will have to visit your daughter and ask her to come to see you."

"You said there were no access points on this semi-tropical island."

"There aren't."

They had arrived at their destination now – an idyllic, well-kept thatched cottage with half-timbered walls, which looked for all the world as if it had been built for the primary purpose of featuring in countless nostalgia-themed jigsaw puzzles.



Tally propped his bicycle up against the wall and knocked. There was no reply.

"The quickest way to get to the island – it's called Tenerife, by the way – is to travel by aircraft. Unfortunately, you won't be able to accompany us, because it requires documentation that you don't possess, but which we had the foresight to procure for ourselves. Once we've spoken to your daughter, then if she's agreeable, we'll convey her to point 293. You can meet her there."

"How long will this take?"

"In Dheghōm time, let's see, an hour to the airport, perhaps four hours before the next flight, four and a half hours in the air, an hour to get through the bureaucratic controls, an hour to Love's apartment. If she's not there, a few hours until she comes home – but it'll be midnight by then, so she will probably be home. Mind you, they eat late in Spain. Overall, I'd say at least twelve hours, maybe longer. She might stay at a friend's overnight, I don't know her habits. Did you want perhaps to come back to point 293 at around this time tomorrow? Does that work for you?"

"I shall have to overcome some stiff objections, but it can be arranged."

"Splendid!" Once again, Tally smiled. Marius didn't seem to be as taken by this as men of his apparent age usually were, but Tally knew that in real life he was somewhat older than his embodiment in Dheghōm suggested.

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"Now", said Tally, "as you perhaps will have realised, in exchange for this service we'd be grateful if you'd be so kind as to tell us how you come to be in Dheghōm when it's supposed to be under an embargo."

"I simply wish to speak to my daughter", said Marius. "I haven't seen her for some time, and –"

"Oh, Marius!" interrupted Tally, frowning in disappointment, "I invited you to treat me as an equal. We both know what I'm asking, and it serves neither of our interests to act otherwise."

"Anyone can *claim* to be clever", said Marius. "I deemed it prudent to check that you really are."

"Well to assuage any remaining doubts you may have, let me note that you have deduced from the travel timings I gave you that we Muses have the capacity to teleport. You hope that by telling Paul that we can do this, he'll be able to trace how we ourselves are entering Dheghōm; teleportation, after all, requires certain privileges. You are now realising that, because I'm telling you this, Paul will not be successful should he instigate such an investigation."

Paul, in case you didn't know, is the lead designer of Dheghōm and of seven other worlds that he and his staff operate. He's a bit of a prick, to be honest.

Marius looked Tally in the eye and for a several seconds said nothing. Then, he broke his silence.

"I'll tell you what you want to know *after* you produce my daughter."

"I assure you, we're trustworthy", said Tally. "We're not wicked, despite our reputation."

"Nevertheless, you did prevent entry to Dheghōm for two full weeks. I think I'm entitled to exercise a degree of caution."

"That's fair enough", consented Tally. "In that case, can I take your photograph to show her? She might not otherwise believe that I've made your acquaintance."

Marius posed, but didn't let down his guard.

Tally snapped him. "There you are", he said, showing it to Marius. "Hmm, you look rather serious; should I take another one, with you smiling? Or a selfie – one with me in it, too?"

"That one will do", he said.

Tally shrugged and closed his phone. "So the proposal is that we'll bring Love to see you – if she wants to see you, we won't force her if she doesn't – on condition that before we let you speak to her, you inform us of the situation that has allowed you into this world."

Marius thought for a moment, then nodded.

"It's a deal. I'll meet you and my daughter this time tomorrow at point 293. Once I've seen her, I'll tell you what you want to know; then, you'll leave us to talk in private."

"Agreed."

He relaxed a little. "As a show of goodwill before I leave, I shall share some information that you may find it useful to know. Paul's view, and that of many of the judges, is that you Muses are the cause

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of Dheghōm's present difficulties. Make of this what you will."

Without looking to see if anyone was watching, he disappeared.

Unlike our Muses, but like Miss Marple, visitors from Bhéwonom don't leave their belongings behind upon dematerialisation. When you have a limited ability to imagine the future, tidiness is a virtue.

Tally immediately opened his phone again. It was 1:10, and he fancied something to eat after his bike ride.

He called Miss Marple.

She answered relatively quickly. "Hello, Tally, have you had any luck?"

"Yes, I spoke with Marius. There's definitely something serious going on, 'difficulties with Dheghōm' he said – and he thought that we were responsible for them. He won't tell us what these difficulties are until he speaks to his daughter, which means Cally will have to go to Tenerife to persuade her to take a trip to the Devil's Quoits."

"Cally can't go, he's only just now arriving in Helmsley."

"Cally's the European traveller, not me. I do the Far East."

"You nevertheless speak fluent Spanish, Tally, and don't pretend differently."

"How about Cleo? Tenerife is just off the coast of North Africa."

"The British Library has been given Cleo's details, not yours. Do stop trying to wriggle out of it."

Our Muses are quite the linguists. They can, of course, all speak Bhéwonomese, but between them they can also speak (if not necessarily read) almost every human language. This doesn't mean that as *individuals* they know the same ones, unlike Pips Jackard. They are, nevertheless, all fluent in those tongues that originate in sub-Saharan Africa, and in ones that are spoken (or at least understood) by very large numbers of people – Mandarin, Spanish, English, Hindi, Bengali, Portuguese – I'm sure you get the idea. For less well-propagated languages, Cally has those of Europe covered, Tally has those of East and Southeast Asia and of the Americas, and Cleo has those of South Asia and of North Africa. Australasia is their main collective blind spot, but Cleo includes it as part of his watch because he likes the sunshine.

Thinking about it ... oh, of course! This isn't a coincidence. Cally, with his blue eyes, looks the most European of the three. Tally's eyes, especially in profile or when he smiles or laughs, have a definite Far-Eastern aspect to them. As for Cleo, well you could clothe him in traditional Indian or Arabic dress and you wouldn't know him from a native.

"OK, I'll go", said Tally, resignedly. "I'll pop back with the bike then pick up my passport and some

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euros. I'll have to book a flight, too; British Airways do them from Gatwick, I think."

"Go to Stansted. It's a fifteen-minute taxi ride from Mountfitchet Castle."

Tally was aghast. "Stansted? You mean ... Ryanair?"

"You won't have any luggage, so there's no need to worry."

"But the seats are so cramped", wailed Tally.

"Cally's two inches taller than you, yet he seems to cope."

Tally conceded defeat. "Very well, I'll be with you in a tick. Do we have anything to eat? I'm ravenous."

"I thought your hunger disappeared when you demanifested?"

"It does, but I'm still ravenous."

Thirty seconds later, when Tally walked in from the garage, Miss Marple was standing ready with his passport.

"If by 'ravenous' you mean 'mildly peckish', I believe there are some nice sausage rolls in the refrigerator that you might find availing. Give them a few seconds in the microwave oven to take off the cold edge, but *don't* try to warm them up or they'll become soggy. I'll fetch some euros from Cally's room."

Tally didn't bother with the microwave: he attacked the sausage rolls cold, as they were, while looking on the Ryanair app.

"There was a flight at twelve, the next one isn't until tomorrow", he shouted.

"Not with your mouth full, dear", called Miss Marple. "Honestly, I try to teach you manners, but you never seem to remember them."

Tally had indeed remembered them. He'd simply chosen not to apply them.

"Augh, Jet2 have one leaving in twenty minutes – I'd never get through security in time."

Miss Marple began to descend the stairs. "It's because flights from England are primarily for tourists; they'll tend to leave at tourist-friendly times."

Tally's eyes lit up. "Tenerife residents who have business in Spain, on the other hand... "

He took another bite from a sausage roll, and pulled up the Vueling app.

A minute later he met with success. "Ohhh yes! Five o'clock from Barcelona! Got you, my elusive beauty! Better still, it arrives at Tenerife Norte, that's half an hour closer to La Orotava than the tourist airport."

"Don't forget that five o'clock in Barcelona is four o'clock here; you'd better make haste." She handed him the euros. "Put these away now, along with your passport, so you don't forget them."

Holding half a sausage roll in his mouth, Tally picked up his bag and complied.

"Please, whatever you do, *don't* eat like that in public", said Miss Marple, wearily. "Is there

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somewhere close to Barcelona where you can manifest?"

"Mmph", replied Tally, who was now beginning to fight his way through the Vueling ticketing system. "Abric Romani, it's maybe an hour from the airport. Damn it, why won't this ... oh, I have to click ... oh nuts, I need my passport details, I thought I had those saved."

He rummaged in his bag.

"Do you speak Catalan?"

"I don't know, I guess I'll find out. I'm sure they all accept Spanish, though; I'll be fine."

So it was that at 17:30 that evening, Tally stepped off flight VY3208 in Tenerife North airport and made his way to the arrivals hall.

An hour later, he was standing outside a building on Calle Obispo Estevez Ugarte in the town of La Ortava, pressing a door buzzer for the fifth time and still eliciting no answer.

It was clear to him both that Love Ellis wasn't home and that he stood little chance of finding her by combing the streets. The sensible thing to do was therefore to wait until she returned from wherever she was.

He looked around for a nearby seat from where he could watch her apartment's door in comfort.

Calle Obispo Estevez Ugarte was on a hill, lined with terraces of colourful houses. This particular section of it, near the top, had properties only on one side of the road; on the other, a park had been levelled out, with a shallow embankment leading



up to it. Along the bottom of this, below palm trees adjacent to the footpath, was a low wall of red-brown rocks that seemed to offer the only convenient place where Tally might sit, other than on someone's car or doorstep.

He took a look, but judging that the dust would make a mess of his dress, chose instead to stand and pace slowly around, hands behind his back to project an innocent, carefree attitude as if waiting to join a group of friends for a night out.

There were pedestrians abroad, but not crowds of them; young men gave him the eye, to which he always responded with a smile followed immediately by a look away, but he didn't feel threatened. The sun was getting low, however, and he was beginning to wish he'd brought a jacket.

It was nine o'clock when he finally spotted her: a blonde, fair-skinned woman in a straw hat, who was coming down the hill from on the side with the houses.

None of our Muses had ever met Love Ellis, but David had once shown them a few publicity photos that he'd collected. Tally was therefore able to recognise her. She looked nothing like her father (who is usually described as being handsome, although Tally couldn't see it). She was rather plain, truth be told, except for her unusually deep-blue eyes. Even at this distance, Tally was quite taken by them.

He crossed the street and shyly waved a friendly, open-fingered wave.

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"Excuse me", he said, in English. "Are you Love Ellis?"

Her hand immediately shot to the small phial of liquid that she wore around her neck on a leather lace.

She said nothing.

"Oh, oh – I'm sorry!", rushed Tally, alarmed. "I didn't think. My name's Tally, I don't mean you any harm: I'm here to bring a message from your father."

"I don't know my father", said Love, coldly.

Tally realised his mistake. "No, no, I'm not a fan – I mean, I *am* a fan, but I really do have a message from him. His name's Marius."

Love didn't relax her grip on the phial.

It contains a healing liquid, in case you've forgotten, strong enough to grow back limbs, reattach decapitations and cure warts, It's the foe of all ailments, natural and unnatural, largely because it isn't really natural itself: its origins are Bhéwonomese.

"Why does he want to speak to me?" she asked.

"I don't know."

"He's not allowed to be here."

"Well he is. Look."

Tally showed her the photograph he'd taken eight hours earlier in Oxfordshire.

Love stared at it for a few seconds. "He never gets any older."

"Sorry he's frowning a bit", Tally withdrew his phone. "He doesn't really trust me."

"You're not one of his people?"

"No."

"But you are from his place?"

"No, I'm not."

He felt Love's eyes flooding into him, and his own eyes widening in response.

"Come inside", she said. "We should talk."

She let go of her phial and took out her house keys as she walked up the short flight of steps to the door.

"I'm renting", she said. "House-buying in Spain is a nightmare even for other EU citizens; Brits can pretty well forget it."

Tally followed her inside.

"Not my choice of décor", said Love, waving dismissively at the walls, "but it – oh, there's no need to take your shoes off, I don't mind if you tromp around in them."

As he slipped back on the trainer he'd just slipped off, Tally wondered whether his show of good manners had left a favourable impression or an unfavourable one.

The reason I know all this, by the way, is because Tally told me. I'm not psychic or anything.

"Have a seat", said Love, hanging up her hat and bag on a peg in the hallway. "The sitting room is through there."

Tally went in.

It was not the mess that he'd been expecting. No piles of half-scribbled poems littered the table;

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no sticky notes adorned the walls; no layers of dust covered books, shelves or lampshades.

"Sorry the place is in a bit of a state", said Love. "Sit, sit", she gestured to the sofa; she herself took an armchair that gave her a clear route to the exit.

Tally obliged. "So the reason I volunteered to come and collect you is that your father wouldn't tell me why he's here unless I did."

"It wasn't because of your charitable heart, then."

"I could have just arranged a phone for him and asked you to call", said Tally. "He did seem to want to speak to you in person, though."

"What do you know of whence he comes?"

Tally hesitated. "I'm not really at liberty to say. The people there have a poor impression of us, and seek to hunt us down."

"That seems to be a depressingly common failing", acknowledged Love, drily. "So who's 'us'?"

"My sisters and I", said Tally.

"You being ... Tally, did you say?"

"Yes – Tally Brewer."

"And are you human, Tally?"

"I'm probably the most human person you've ever met."

Love raised an eyebrow, but in disbelief rather than surprise. "Where do you live?"

"Yorkshire".

"You don't have a Yorkshire accent."

"I can put one on", said Tally, putting one on, "but I didn't grow up there and I don't want to try

to trick the locals into thinking I did. I couldn't carry off the cultural aspects of Yorkshireness for very long anyway, they'd soon see through my act and resent me for it."

"Cultural aspects such as what?"

"Well, eating pie after pie after pie would probably do for me", said Tally.

Love laughed. "When am I to meet my father?"

"At just gone one o'clock tomorrow."

"We'll have to catch an early flight, then."

"No, I'll teleport us directly to the Devil's Quoit."

Love folded her arms, scornfully. "You said you weren't from my father's place. You said you were human. Humans can't fucking teleport! How do you reconcile that contradiction?"

Tally caught himself looking at Love's legs. He had no choice but to brazen it out and pretend he was staring into space, deep in thought.

"Well my problem is", he finally answered, "that if I tell you too much about myself then it'll get back to your father. As I said, there are people who want to hunt us down. Lots of people. Lots of hunt. Lots of down."

Love gave him a faint smile. "You are a curious one, Tally."

"It's not me who's asking all the questions."

Love suddenly froze, her extraordinary eyes wide, as if struck by a powerful inspiration.

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A few seconds later, she shook her head and returned to reality. "Sorry about that, but when the muse strikes...."

Tally's heart thumped hard for a beat, but his head knew there was nothing to worry about; Love wasn't aware he was a Muse – although she might become so, were her father to tell her tomorrow.

"You'll need to bring your passport with you", he said. "You'll have to fly back, there's nowhere to teleport in Tenerife."

"That's why I like it here, at least for now. So you didn't bring a suitcase full of soil from Jebel Irhoud with you, then?"

"I would have done if I'd thought of it."

"Then you should plonk me back someplace in the Schengen zone, or my passport stamps won't balance."

"I'll have to teleport back myself. Somewhere, right now, some bemused EU border control officer is looking at the record of my flight here and wondering how I managed to be in Barcelona to take it."

"How does this teleporting work? Is it like dying and waking up somewhere else?"

"No, but it's as instantaneous. I can only take something with me if I'm carrying it, though, so I'll have to pick you up for it."

"Does that include whatever objects I'm carrying or wearing, too?"

"Yes, if they're not too heavy for me: no motorbikes, no pets larger than a wombat, no cases of contraband olive oil."

"I assume this doesn't involve your heaving me up in a firefighter's lift?"

"Fun though that might be, no, I'm not strong enough. I'll only need to raise you off the ground an inch or two and hold you there."

Love said nothing for a few seconds, then rose to her feet. "I'm hungry. Shall we go someplace to eat? I know a nice little tapas bar about a fifteen-minute walk from here, we can chat along the way."

"Oh, yes please! I've only eaten two sausage rolls since breakfast and I'm famished." Tally stood up and shouldered his bag.

"Now I know you're not from Bhéwonom", said Love.

It was night outside, but the streets were brightly lit and abuzz with people.

"Where we're going doesn't look too salubrious from the outside", said Love, "but that means it won't be packed with tourists."

"How do you spend your time here?" asked Tally.

"How do you spend yours in Yorkshire?" countered Love.

"I play a lot of video games", said Tally. "Mainly single-player, I mean I *like* multi-player, but not so much the multi-players."

Love half-smiled. "What are you playing now?"

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"I've just gone back to *Crusader Kings III* for a bit. I was playing *Civ VII* but it's a piece of shit – oh! Sorry, I mean, well that's my opinion, but I won't think you're weird if you like it. Well, not much, anyway."

"I bought it when it came out." She gave a short, bitter laugh. "That's 70 euros I won't be getting back."

Tally chuckled, holding the follow-up grin for a little longer than he meant to.

They were at the top of the hill now, and turned right. A group of three young men on the other side of the road spotted them.

"Hello, girls", one of them shouted, in Spanish.

"Goodbye, boys", shouted Tally, back at them.

They laughed, and one gave a quick salute. Tally laughed, too.

"You speak Spanish, then", observed Love.

"It's popular", replied Tally.

"I'm learning, but the locals gabble too fast for me to follow at present. Why did you engage with those men?"

"Oh, they only wanted a little attention, to shore up their confidence, to feel that women might find them attractive."

"And do you?"

Tally blushed ferociously.

"Huh. I see." She glanced askance at him.

Tally looked away.

"I should have loaned you a coat, it might get cold later on."



"I didn't think to bring one", said Tally, relieved at the change of subject. "I mean, August on a semi-tropical island? With a semi-active volcano giving it underfloor heating as well?"

Love laughed.

He wanted to tell her he liked her laugh, but held his tongue.

"Why are you so interested in why my father has come to this world?" she asked.

"Because it's meant to be forbidden. If he's here then something is very wrong."

"He is allowed to contact me for the purpose of asking if I want to visit his place."

"He could do that by having an invitation materialise on your bedside table. No, it seems to us that he's only been allowed in because his presence here no longer matters. If that's the case, it would seem to imply that Dheghōm – that's our world – "

"So I've heard."

"– well that it's going to be turned off. If it is, we'd rather like to try to do something about it."

"It isn't."

"You're sure about that?"

"Positive. Our future is indefinitely long."

"I thought there was a review after a year, Bhéwonom time? Er, Bhéwonom being – "

"I know what Bhéwonom is. Who told you there was a review after a year?"

Tally wavered. "Er, David Scott. Do you know him?"

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"I know of him. Who told David Scott there'd be a review?"

"I don't know."

"Romy Pabst told him, and I told Romy Pabst."

"You lied to her?"

"No. I merely told her a subset of the truth. There will be a review after a year – a very, very long time after a year."

"Are you lying to me, now?"

Love ignored the question. "Are you and Pabst part of the same organisation, Tally?"

Once again, Tally felt the potency of Love's stare.

She really did have quite beautiful eyes.

"What? No, of course not!" he protested.

"Only, it might be that they have some kind of teleportation device. They possess quite a collection of litter left behind by visitors to our world." She put her hand on the phial that hung from her neck.

"I can see why you might think that, but I neither have, nor need, any such device to teleport. It's just something I can do. I could prove it right now, only I wouldn't be able to get back here in time to take you to see Marius."

"And your sisters? Can they also teleport like a hero?"

"Yes, we all can."

"I see. So although I'd have no trouble fighting off just you, if all three of you descended on me at once then you could lift me up and zoom me to

Stanton, and there'd be not a great deal I could do about it."

Tally was shocked. "That course of action never even crossed our minds! We're not kidnappers. If you don't want to speak to your father, you only have to tell me and I'll inform him of the fact tomorrow. Do you see badness in everyone?"

"No", replied Love, "but if you'd pouted after saying that, I'd have seen it in you."

Tally frowned, but noticed that Love was smiling faintly, so smiled back. "Is it OK to pout now instead?"

"I'm not gay, you know."

Tally was dumbstruck. "I ... didn't say you were."

"No, but you've been coming onto me ever since we met."

"I have?" He didn't understand.

"That bashful wave at the beginning, those coy glances away, the little skips you insert when you're walking, your turns of phrase. It's OK, I'm not judging you, but you do need to know that you're wasting your time."

"I ... wasn't aware I was spending my time on that in the first place."

"Really?" She didn't seem convinced.

Tally had no idea how to respond. "Yes, Really" was the best he could manage.

"I don't look it, but I'm 32", continued Love. "I had plenty of boyfriends in my teens, but all that ended in a car crash a dozen years ago. The man I'd hoped to marry died that day; I should have died

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myself, but I didn't. I haven't dated since. Men seem to sense I'm off-limits, even here, where my easily sunburnt skin marks me out as fair game. They look, but they leave me alone. Women, on the other hand... "

"Their loss", mumbled Tally.

"There you go again."

"Yes, but that time it was deliberate. Let me tell you how it is with men. It's all about respect. Love – can I call you that? – you give off incredible vibes that men can't help but pick up on. They see you're brilliant – it's obvious to anyone – and yes, they know you could shoot them down with a single word, but that's not what's stopping them. They also see that you're distant, hiding behind a front, and they know that the person they're speaking to isn't the person inside. They may not be able to articulate this, but they feel it, instinctively. Sure, they often behave in a boorish way, but they mean you no injury: fundamentally most men are decent human beings. They intuit that you want to keep yourself to yourself, so they honour that. When they do hit on you, they're offering you an opportunity to leave your self-imposed solitude. If you brush them off, OK, well you're not ready to do so; at least the gesture was there. They'll shrug and move on. In a way, they're showing compassion, although I don't think that either they or society in general would necessarily see it quite like that."

"And the women?"

"I guess they're more calculating."

"And you?" She stopped, eyes and mouth wide open with sudden realisation. "Oh my god!"

Tally's heart sank in despair. He could tell immediately what was coming.

"You're a man?!"

"I'm afraid so. Sorry."

"What? No, no, don't apologise, it's – I mean I know plenty of trans people, I'm a gamer, but – "

"I'm not trans", said Tally, firmly. "This isn't a case of simple body dysmorphia."

"Yet if you're male, in a female body?"

"It's my body, and I'm liberated by it."

"Liberated?"

He sighed, apologetically. "Please don't ask me why. It's hard to explain without betraying myself."

Love looked him in his pleading eyes, then – to his complete surprise – delivered him a short hug. "It must be difficult for you."

"It's ... manageable. Frustrating at times, but manageable." He nodded. "Thanks, by the way, for understanding."

"I'm a poet. Understanding is my stock in trade." She smiled. "Come on, we're nearly at the eating place."

They set off walking again.

"Tell me about your sisters", said Love. "Are they both men as well?"

"Yes, luck of the draw. Cally is the eldest. She's strong and protective, she never lets anything get on top of her, she always knows what to do – oh, and she's so cool. I really look up to her. Cleo is the

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youngest. She's clever with technology, but that's not what she's about; it's how she interacts with people that defines her, she's ever so kind and thoughtful. She's more timid than Cally and me, but we both look out for her."

"What do they think of their middle sister?"

"They think I'm a dreamer. They think I'm not serious often enough. They think I play too much on my looks. They think I can be frustrating at times, but that I'm endearing with it."

"Are they right?"

"I don't know, what do you think?"

Love pondered for a second or two. "I think they're right."

"I love them to pieces and I don't know what I'd do without them."

"I can tell."

She stopped outside a restaurant in the middle of a row of shops. "Not much to look at, but the *papas arrugadas* are to die for."

"Like your eyes."

"Stop that!" she said, jokingly, slapping Tally lightly on the arm as she did so. "You were supposed to say something like 'not literally, I hope'."

"Act of compassion released. Shell of solitude remains unpenetrated. Withdraw."

Love shook her head. "You're incorrigible!"

"I try my best."

"I appreciate the effort, though." She smiled, gently. "Perhaps you can try again later, once I've got to know you more."

She opened the door and led Tally inside.

It wasn't brightly lit, and the tables were made out of barrels with circles of wood screwed on top of them, but it did have a certain ambiance that Tally found appealing.

Small groups of men made up the majority of the clientele, but there were a few young couples and singles there, too.

"It gets busy on Fridays and Saturdays", said Love. "I avoid it then, but mid-week is fine, they know me here."

She pointed at an empty table and raised her eyebrows questioningly at the waiter. He nodded, so she took Tally over and together they sat down.

"We've intrigued them", said Tally. "He said 'She has a friend tonight' to the barman."

He didn't mention that the barman had added 'a pretty one, too'.

"You have some kind of super-hearing ability?"

The bar was so noisy from chatter alone that Tally could only tell there was background music playing when he specifically listened for it.

"No, I can lip-read."

"You can lip-read Spanish? Well that's a talent."

"My sisters can't lip-read at all, so I'll allow you to be awestruck." He flicked back his hair, mock-proudly.

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Love seemed to find this amusing, but had a question. "Why do you call them your sisters when they're", she lowered her voice, "your brothers?"

"Ah. I don't ... they're not ...". Tally was at a loss. He *had* actually called them sisters – it wasn't an artefact of the translation screen that Cleo had set up. He didn't regard them as brothers, but had difficulty rationalising to himself why not.

Love waited patiently for a reply.

"It's because", he explained, "when we became who we are, it was as sisters. I can't say anything much more than that because, because – "

"– because you're worried I might tell my father."

"It's not that I don't trust you, it's that ... I've made promises. I keep my promises."

Love persisted. "I won't tell him, you know."

Tally glanced down. "Because you've decided not to meet him?"

"What? Don't be silly, of course I'll meet him – he's my father! You don't have to *persuade* me to meet him. You're free to go to your hotel right now, if you want, you can collect me at my place tomorrow. You don't have to hang out with me."

"I like hanging out with you – that's if, if you don't mind."

"No, I don't mind. I like hanging out with you, too."

"Also, I *may* have neglected to book a hotel. I came in rather a hurry."



"Well perhaps, if you behave, I'll let you stay at my place. I have a spare room and charge very reasonable rates."

They both smiled.

Tally's smiles are contagious, but so are Love's.

The waiter came over, which put Love into a mild state of panic. "Oh, we should have looked at the menu!" She switched to broken Spanish. "Er, we will start with my usual and then – "

"Just bring twice the normal amount", interrupted Tally, "I'm sure I'll enjoy it."

"We'll have some *croquetas caseras*, too", added Love, then to Tally explained, "they're good and filling, if you're as hungry as you say you are."

"Just sparkling water to drink?" asked the waiter, with evident disapproval.

Love looked towards Tally. "Yes", he replied, "no wine for me either – sorry!"

His winning smile duly won the waiter, who left in less of an ill humour than he'd likely been anticipating.

"You're a man, yet you flirt with waiters."

"You're a woman, yet you don't."

"Flirting with waiters isn't the default. Not flirting with waiters is the default."

"It's the default for me", said Tally. "I like to make people feel special."

"Because you don't think you're special yourself?"

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Tally shrugged. "I don't self-analyse. That way lies anxiety, depression and self-loathing. I am who I am, so I act how I act."

"I do self-analyse, but indirectly, through my poetry. It's hard to tell – I'm not confessional, but what I say is me, so in some ways it couldn't be otherwise."

"I've read your poetry. Cally doesn't care for it, and Cleo thinks it's all about the performance – that poetry slam you won in March is on Spotify – but me, I like it."

"Why?"

"Because I understand it. Not all of it, just the pieces that you write unadorned. Most people read more into them than is there. They think that you're speaking in riddles and metaphor, with shifting contexts carrying multiple layers of meaning – and when they try to interpret your words, they construct edifices of understanding specific to their own condition. They're pleased that you've told them what they needed to know, but in actual fact you're not saying any of that. You're just telling it straight."

Love's deep-blue eyes bore the strange sadness of recognition. "My best poems, yes. This ... this is unexpected."

"What's unexpected about it?"

"No-one has noticed it before, and I myself have never communicated it before. Yes. I do tell it straight. I mean, I also write a lot of the fluff that the poetry establishment demands, but it's all a

smokescreen. They rave over what they consider are my most recondite works, but they don't – they don't get them. They don't get them *at all*."

"Well I get them, and they're astounding! The raw power...."

"Thanks." She hesitated. "You're not just making this up to humour me, are you?"

"Love, you don't have to play that game. You don't have to wear that mask. You don't have to please people who will drop you as soon as some superficial substitute sashays by from bandwagon-land. You *know* who you are. You just worry about the consequences of showing yourself to the world."

"You see *why*, though, don't you? You, of all people, *must* see *why*."

"It's because you care."

Love closed her eyes and breathed slowly.

Tally could see she was getting emotional, even upset. He wanted to put his hand on top of hers, to comfort her, to show her she wasn't alone – *how* he wanted to do that; but he knew he couldn't. It would rip him up too much inside.

"Perhaps I *should* go", he said, hesitantly. "I've distressed you; that wasn't my intention. I said I meant you no harm, and it's true, I don't; yet here I am, harming you."

"No, don't you *dare* leave", ordered Love. "I'm speaking to you unfiltered now. I *never* get to speak to people this way – not my mother, not my father. not anyone."

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"Are you sure?"

"How many times am I likely to open my heart to an honourable man?"

Tally paused. "Love, you said you were speaking unfiltered, but that line was six trochees with a single, stressed syllable at the end for emphasis."

Love struggled to strangle a sob. "God, Tally, you're *perfect*."

Now it was Tally's turn to hold back his feelings, but he knew how to bury them away. All men do.

"Pabst thought I should speak to a therapist", said Love, "but if I did that, the therapist would need to speak to a therapist as a result. How much do you know about me?"

"I know you're deathless. I know your mother is an artist who loves you dearly but regards you as an unfinished project. I know your father is from a world beyond ours, where he is rich and powerful, yet that he sees himself in you and is affectionate. I know that you twice saved our world. I know – "

"That's all there really is to know."

Tally didn't think so. "I know you're lonely. I know you're beautiful and smart and vulnerable and crying inside. I know you carry the weight of our existence on your shaking yet unyielding shoulders. You do so pragmatically, you do so without complaint, you do it whether anyone knows you do it or not. You do it, as I said, because you *care*."

Love paused as she absorbed Tally's assessment.

"I suppose I do."

Their conversation was interrupted by the appearance of the first round of tapas.

Both of them were relieved for the respite.

"Do you have any photos of your sisters?" asked Love.

"Of course", said Tally. "We're recordable."

He wiped his fingers on a napkin and took out his phone. After a few quick swipes and taps, he showed it to Love.

"This is Cally. As you can see, she likes to dress practically."

"She has a faraway look in her eyes."

"I guess she does a little, it's not something I've really noticed. She's very grounded, though, she isn't a romantic like me. Oh, this is her all dressed up, we'd just found out it was her birthday so we went to the Old Deanery at Ripon."

"How old is she?"

"Two years older than me."

"And how old are you?" She took a bite of something tasty that Tally didn't know the name of.

"I'm, er ... let me check."

"Wait – you don't know how *old* you are?"

Tally fished his passport out of his bag and consulted the photo page. "It's August now, so I must be 24."

Love, who had picked up Tally's phone, was rotating it for the full, landscape view. "Cally does look very fetching in that dress. Is it silk?"

## Bhrēwā

"She can appear girly when she wants to." He returned his passport to his bag.

Love was flicking through some more photos. "Is this Cleo?"

Tally looked. "Yes, that's her. She's always apprehensive about having her photo taken"

"She doesn't look a lot like you."

"She has a much slighter figure, yes."

"No, I mean – don't take this the wrong way – she looks almost Indian."

"She doesn't when she takes off her glasses. There's nothing wrong with her eyesight, by the way, she just wears specs as like an accessory."

Cally flicked through some more images. "And who's this?"

Tally hesitated. "That's ... I might have taken a photograph of a pretty girl I saw in Morrison's last week."

"She's wearing some kind of weird, retro outfit."

"She's still a pretty girl."

"She's looking straight at you."

"Yes, I had to frown, stand to one side, then take another photograph as if what I *really* wanted a picture of was the bread aisle behind her, and she'd been in the way. Can I have my phone back now, please?"

Love handed it over, accompanied by a closed-mouth, condemnatory smile.

"You can withdraw that remark about my being perfect now, if you like."

Love shook her head dismissively, then tucked into some more tapas.

"Do you have any photos of your parents, Tally?"

"No."

"Do you know your father?"

"As far as I can tell, there's no evidence I even have one. That's why your poem hits me particularly hard."

The poem Tally was talking about is Love Ellis's best-known and most-enigmatic work, *I Don't Know My Father*. We, of course, are all aware that this widely celebrated piece is not enigmatic at all.

"You're envious? Offended?"

"Envious? Why would I be envious?"

"Because there I am, complaining about not knowing my father, when you don't even know if you have one."

"No, that's not it at all. I'm *happy* for you. That final line of apprehensive hope: you're telling your story, not mine."

"That was poetical of me", sighed Love. "I shouldn't have put it in. Poetry is supposed to be about finding things meaningful to you in the words of someone else; it's not about finding things meaningful to the poet."

"Yet if the poet is meaningful to me?"

"That still should say more about you than it does about the poet."

"Well, I can't help what I feel, only what I do with that feeling."

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"I suppose the poet's traditional perspective is a little arrogant", she conceded. "It's all, 'I say what I say and if you want to interpret it in a way particular to you, go ahead'. It's dismissive of empathy."

"Or it's empathy incarnate."

Love, apparently unconvinced, realigned the conversation. "So, if you know nothing about your father, what can you tell me about your mother?"

"I know no more about my mother than I do my father."

"So you're an orphan? Doesn't Cally remember her? She'd have been at least three years old when Cleo was born."

"No, we grew up together."

"Alone?"

"Yes."

Love poured her deep-blue eyes into his, scrutinising him.

"You're lying."

Tally sighed. "I'm cautious."

"Yet you do want to tell someone – someone who isn't one of your sisters."

She was right, and Tally capitulated. "Very well, not *quite* alone: there's an elderly lady who's like a mother to us. Her name's Jane."

"Do you have a photo of her?"

"She doesn't like her photo being taken, and it isn't worth taking anyway."

"What do you mean, it isn't worth it?"



Tally took another of the *croquetas caseras*. They really did hit the spot insofar as alleviating pangs of hunger was concerned.

He didn't want to tell Love any of this, but she'd let him into herself; he felt he should – no, he wanted to – reciprocate.

"She's not the same as us."

"You're stalling."

Tally sighed again and took out his phone. He quickly found the photo he was looking for.

"This is her", he said, showing it to Love.

"The pretty girl in Morrison's? You told me Jane was an elderly lady."

"She is. This is what she looked like when she was in her twenties. Photos of her almost always come out as random noise, but occasionally we get lucky and her image is only time-slipped."

"So you could get lucky again."

"I don't want to. This isn't how she is to us. Seeing her young and vibrant, seeing her attractive; it feels kind of ... wrong."

"Why did you encourage me to think that you're in the habit of taking illicit photos of random women in supermarkets?"

"You don't know that I'm not."

"I do. You're not."

"I wanted to protect her." He looked away. "Damn, but I shouldn't have told you. It's ... too close." He met her eyes again. "I've endangered her. I wanted to share myself with you, but in doing so I've shared too much about, about Jane. If Marius

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hears of this, he could well pass it on to Paul – you know who Paul is?"

Love nodded. "I've heard of him. Pabst called him *Weghtrowénts*."

"Paul could – well he *would* – delete Jane in an instant if he knew about her. He *mustn't* find out."

"I don't see the problem. Paul's forbidden from interfering with the operation of our world in any way."

Tally was in torment now. "I can't say. I *really*, truly, can't say. I want to tell you everything, but – believe me, please believe me, it *does* matter. It matters a very great deal. Miss – Jane – she means the world to us, literally the world. Cleo would be utterly bereft if she was deleted, he's very, very close to her. Please, please don't say *anything* about this to your father."

He looked at Love, desperately, imploringly.

"Jesus, Tal", she murmured. "If I wasn't straight, I'd so fucking kiss you right now. You're adorable."

Although well-intentioned, Love's words devastated Tally. It was as if she'd reached deep into his chest, slipped out his beating heart, caressed it, then thrown it onto the floor and stomped on it.

He sat back. "If I wasn't straight, I'd let you."

He recovered.

When Tally told me all this, he glossed over what happened during the rest of the meal. I don't even know if they split the bill. He said that they talked about little things, seeking out common

interests – of which I don't doubt there were many – and sharing their opinions about the sorry state of the world.

I expect that Tally didn't tell Love that our Muses were largely responsible for the way the world is. A promise is a promise, after all.

He did mention to me that he'd posted in the Muses' WhatsApp group that Love had consented to meeting Marius. This was perhaps short of the level of commentary expected by the others, but it conveyed the salient point, and was sufficient to allay their growing concern that he'd daydreamed and left his phone on the plane.

He picked up the detailed story at a point when he and his new-found soulmate were walking back to her house.

If I sound jealous there, it's because I am.

"So what would you advise, Tal?" asked Love.

"You know me inside and out now."

"Bear up", said Tally. "My own predicament is irretrievable, but yours isn't. You still have hope. I can't be the only person in the world with whom you can make a connection. Dheghōm is a wonderful and wondrous place. Who knows who else is out there? There could be a young man mooching outside your front door right now, all forlorn, looking for someone who can make sense of *him*. He doesn't have to be special, he doesn't have to be anything other than human. OK, so he does need to have compatible body hardware, but other than that he could be anybody."

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"In the unlikely event that there is one waiting there, I bet he'll hit on you first."

Tally laughed. "You'll know him by how he *doesn't* hit on either of us. Me, because he fancies you; you, because he's shy."

"He'll be in a relationship. Or gay. Or both."

"Until, one day, you'll find he isn't."

She sighed. "So that's all you've got? Live and hope?"

"That's all anyone's got."

He shivered.

"You should have brought a jacket", said Love, linking arms with him.

Tally let her, even though it wrenched at him.

Hope is a powerful thing.

Once back, they played *It Takes Two* on Love's PS5 until one in the morning.

Tally hadn't brought any sleepwear, so Love loaned him a nightshirt.

He looked at himself in the long mirror in the guest room as he plaited his hair.

He looked at his beautiful eyes and his beautiful nose and his beautiful cheeks and his especially beautiful lips.

He stepped back and checked out his body. He looked at his beautiful figure and his beautiful breasts and his beautiful bottom and his especially beautiful legs.

He tied off the plait with a band, then got into bed and silently wept himself to sleep.

It was gone nine when Tally awoke the next morning, but he didn't leave the guest room until he heard Love moving around outside.

"Good morning, Tal", she said, cheerfully. "Do you fancy some breakfast? I can do us some eggs or we can go to a place I know nearby."

"Whichever you prefer", said Tally.

"Let's eat in, then. The kitchen is this way. How do you like yours? Scrambled? Dippy? Poached? – Oh, don't say poached unless you want to take a chance, I'm not very good at poached. Fried is even worse, which doesn't make a lot of sense but that's just how it is."

"You seem sunny this morning", observed Tally.

"I am", confirmed Love. "Put the kettle on, would you? I have some tea over there on the shelf, in the green tin. It isn't great, but tea isn't really a thing round here, except for tourists."

Tally obliged.

"What's the weather like in England? Will I need an umbrella?"

"It's England. You could need anything from factor 50 suncream to a snow plough."

She laughed. "Jeans, T-shirt and contingencies it is, then."

Men are more able than women to read positive emotions from body language, did you know that? Women are better than men at reading neutral and negative ones. See Sokolov *et al*, "Gender Affects Body Language Reading", 2011, if you don't believe me.

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Even if you still don't believe me, Tally picked up on Love's excitement.

"Thrilled about meeting your father?" he asked.

"Cups are in that cupboard", said Love, nodding in the approximate direction. "Yes, although I'm also a little anxious. This will be the first time I'll have met him having known in advance that I'm about to meet him."

"What's he like? He was somewhat taciturn with me."

"He's charming, he's gracious, he's interested in how I'm getting along. He doesn't tell me what to do. I quite like him."

"What do you think he wants to say?"

"That does worry me", said Love, taking three eggs from the fridge. "I'll make us an omelette. As you said, he's not supposed to be here."

"You're still bubbling with happiness, though."

"Yes, that's because I've made a decision."

She cracked the eggs into a bowl.

Tally waited. "So are you going to tell me what it is, Love, or tease me for longer?"

She smiled, broadly. "I've written my last poem. As of half an hour ago, I'm no longer a poet."

Tally was aghast. "What?!"

"My swansong: it's to be the only entry in my final collection, *Love is Love*."

"Can you have a collection of one item?"

"Yes, basic set theory. Don't argue, I'm a mathematician."

"Why stop, though?" He walked closer to her, because the kettle was beginning to get a little noisy. "Your poetry is loved by so many people."

"I've no need to work myself out any more. It's a huge, bursting, glorious relief. I'm", she shrugged, "free."

"This isn't anything to do with me, is it?"

"Poetry is to do with whatever the reader reads into it. I'll just nip and get you it – don't let the butter in that pan get too hot."

Tally didn't know how hot 'too hot' was, but watched it anyway.

Love returned with a page torn out of a spiral-bound notebook. "Here, this is yours, to keep."

This is what it said.

### *Curious*

He who wants to know.  
She whom others want to know.  
He who understands.  
She whom others understand.  
He who needs to be.  
She whom others need to be.  
A single soul.  
A perfect whole.  
The best of you and me.

Tally read it.

The tears were too powerful. He couldn't hold them back.

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"You like it?" asked Love, glancing over to him as she got on with fixing breakfast.

"It's about me", said Tally, quietly. "About us. About everyone. All at the same time."

"Act of compassion released. Shell of solitude penetrated. Mission successful. Return to base."

Tally broke. He ran up behind her, hugged her round the waist, and rested his head on her shoulder.

He held her for as long as he dared. This was the happiest he would ever, ever be, and he wanted the moment to last for all eternity.

Oh, don't worry, Tally fans. He was mistaken.



## Chapter 7

## In which Cally is Angelic

Cally's taxi was five miles from Helmsley when Miss Marple called him.

"Cally, dear, have you heard the 11 o'clock news?"

"No, what have I missed?"

"It's about that triple murder there was in Helmsley recently." Miss Marple was guarded, because she knew that the taxi driver might overhear.

"The one with the shotguns?", asked Cally, playing along.

"The police say they're looking for a young woman who was the girlfriend of one of the victims and the half-sister of the other. Her name is Michayla Harris, with a Y. Do you know her?"

"No, I don't know everyone in town, she's not a friend. Stop worrying."

"Where are you?"

"I'll be there in five or ten minutes."

"Very well, dear. Goodbye."

Tally tapped the red icon and closed his phone. "Mothers!" he said, to the taxi driver, by way of explanation.

Upon arrival in the market square, he sought out the yellow Mercedes that he'd disappeared

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from almost exactly an hour earlier. It didn't look to have been disturbed. Three sets of clothes lay flopped on the upholstery; handbags and shoes were on the floor. Cally collected everything up and took them to the boot, removing and pocketing the car keys he'd been carrying when he'd dematerialised. Yes, these jeans also had functioning pockets.

He recovered the scrying device from its hiding place and took it with him to the driver's seat.

It occurred to him that he ought to check that the car really *hadn't* been messed with while unattended, given how Mr Bright's little team prided itself on avoiding continuity errors, so he span the disc back to the present and began to rewind it to the past.

He discovered something not-quite-right.

The car had indeed been left alone, but when he reached the point when he, Tally and Cleo had disappeared, he was surprised to discover that they hadn't been there in the first place. Running forward from a minute before that point, doors opened, doors slammed, then clothes, jewellery and make-up appeared before falling onto the seats. There was, however, no sign of any human presence. It looked to be a scene from a haunting.

Could it really be the case that our Muses didn't appear in Dheghōm's logs?

Cally thought about the means by which the logs might be constructed, concluding that yes, there was every reason to suppose that people who

didn't have accession numbers wouldn't be picked up by the logging service. Probes, such as Miss Marple, might escape it, too; they were created to gather logs, so probably worked by intercepting local logging signals.

Well that was information that might come in handy some day.

Not wishing to interrupt Tally's meeting with Marius, nor Cleo's doubtlessly-fraught drive to Wetherby, Cally left a message in the WhatsApp group then got out and swapped shoes to the pair that he'd been wearing when he dematerialised. He hadn't been lying when he said he liked them.

Taking the scryer with him, he locked up the car and surveyed his surroundings.

The police didn't know that Michayla Harris, also known as Miranda, was driving the Scotts' MG3, so they'd have problems finding her. He *did* know, however, which put him at an advantage.

When she'd left Ivy Cottage, Harris would have either turned right towards Rievaulx or left towards the main road through the town – the A170. Betting that she'd do the latter, she would have arrived at the roundabout on Market Place then either turned south or east. This junction wasn't very far at all from where he was, so he wandered over to the corner, leaned against the wall of a building that said it was a bank, and took the scrying device out of his bag.

The spot was rather too much in the open for his liking, but Cally is nothing if not quick-

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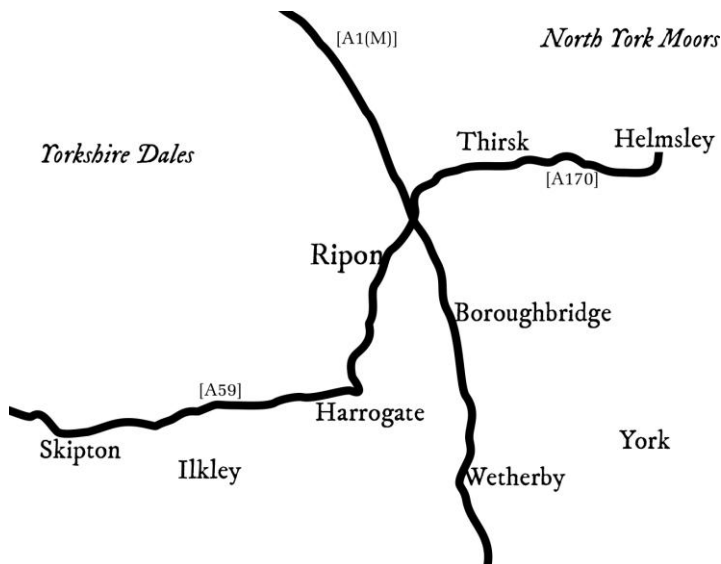
thinking. He'd be able to explain himself if someone came over to ask what he was doing.

This being the north of England, however, no-one did in the five minutes that it took Cally to ascertain that Michayla Harris, suspected triple-murderess, had taken the A170 south.

Cally silently cursed the fact that the scryer didn't have bookmarks or tabs for keeping places, so returned to the yellow Mercedes trying not to rotate it very much.

Yes, it did still travel backwards and forwards when rotated even while paused. You think Cally wouldn't have tried that?

There are a lot of directions coming up, so I'm going to be super-helpful and provide maps. I know, I know – I'm too kind.



So began a long and fitful journey. Cally followed the road, checking at every significant junction which way the MG3 had gone. Sometimes, he simply had to plump for a direction then pull over when able to do so to confirm it was indeed the right one.

Occasionally, it wasn't the right one and he had to go back and try again.

Believe me, if you're trying to follow a scrying device and drive a car at the same time, it isn't easy. They don't work like satnavs.

The route took Cally through Thirsk and Ripon to Harrogate, then west from there to Skipton; there, Cally detoured to the town centre. Under normal circumstances, such a journey would have

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taken perhaps 80 or 90 minutes, but with all the stops and do-overs that came from using the scrying device, it was close to four o'clock when he pulled into the local Morrison's to refuel both the car and himself. He hadn't eaten since Bhrēwā and was getting hungry, although not as much as he was that time he had to eat some of Tally's home cooking. He shuddered at the memory.

There was a café in the store, so after a short trip to the toilet he sat down at a table to fill himself up on a jacket potato. He treated himself to a blueberry muffin, too, which was reasonably priced but did need the cup of tea that came with it.

He still had no clue where Harris might have been heading. Wherever it was, she wouldn't have a personal connection with the place, unless she was incredibly stupid – which remained, of course, a possibility.

He didn't know if she'd stopped for fuel yet, because he hadn't been able to scry on her journey continuously. If she'd done so, she would have had to have paid with someone else's card – Melanie's perhaps – or the police would have picked her up.

He quickly opened the BBC news app on his phone to check that the police had not, in fact, picked her up.

They hadn't. Detectives still wanted to speak to a Miss Michayla Harris, and provided a number she could use to contact them.

David and Melanie had showed up at Ivy Cottage at 10 at night, so it would have been maybe 10:45 when David arrived back at Roeclyffe Lane to be made to open his safe. Add fifteen minutes for that, then another 45 minutes back to Helmsley: the chances were, Harris had shot the three men some time between 11:45 and midnight. That would mean it would have been something like half-past one in the morning when she went through Skipton.

Looking at Google maps, Cally tried to figure out where she might have been heading. Burnley, Blackburn or Preston looked fair possibilities; she'd already gone past Leeds, and there were better routes to Manchester and Liverpool. If she'd set her sights further afield, well there were better routes to Scotland, too. Maybe Morecambe was on the cards? It boasted plenty of guest houses; a woman, even travelling alone, could easily hole up in one for a week or two.

She wouldn't find one open in the small hours of the morning, though. Either she'd driven on, sleeplessly, through the night to some far-distant haven, or she'd pulled over somewhere and slept in the MG3.

He guessed at the latter. She'd have been pumping adrenaline when she left Ivy Cottage, but once that ran out, she'd find herself tired as baby.

She couldn't have stopped and kipped in the middle of a busy road, so her stopping-place would have had to have to been somewhere relatively

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secluded. If he could find it, he could probably scry inside her car as she was pulling to a halt – not so much to see her face as to see her satnav.

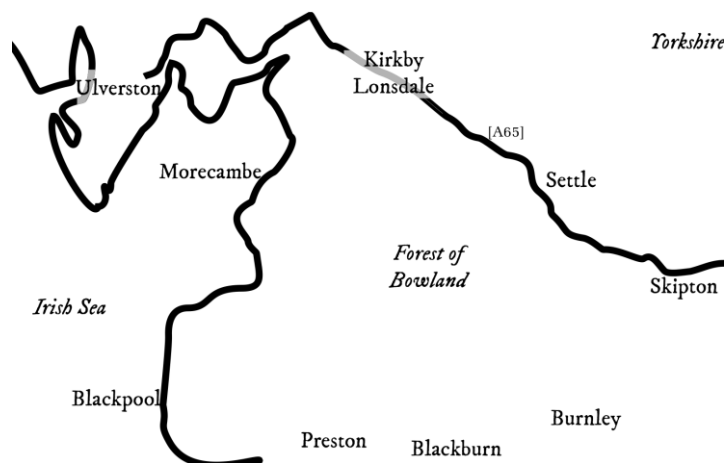
It was the closest thing to a plan he could muster.

He checked in with Miss Marple. Tally was flying to see Love Ellis. Cleo was still in Wetherby, reading what David had been reading there. All in all, progress was slow.

He asked her to check Melanie's credit card account to see if any money had been withdrawn for fuel. Miss Marple said she'd already looked and it hadn't been touched.

He finished his muffin and swigged back the rest of his tea.

He had to press on.





Harris had taken the A65 out of Skipton, towards the Lake District. With the Yorkshire Dales on one side and the Forest of Bowland on the other, it was a scenic drive, lined with drystone walls and green, open fields.

In the dark, it was probably a nightmare.

There was a patch of grass just after a crossroads. Cally pulled onto it and checked the sryer.

A couple of minutes later, he was persuaded that if Harris *had* gone past in the MG3, it wasn't between 2:00 and 3:00 that morning. She'd stopped somewhere between the turn-off to Settle, where he'd last spotted her, and the turn-off to Clapham.

No, not the Clapham in London; that isn't the only Clapham in the country. Honestly, you can be so picky at times.

This part of the world is ill-served by roads, so there weren't many exits Harris could have taken. Cally decided to use a binary chop technique to find where she and the A65 had parted company.

Three miles south, Crow Nest Lane: she'd gone north from there.

One and a half miles north of Crow Nest Lane, Orcaber Lane: oh! That's where she'd turned off. That was a stroke of luck.

Orcaber Lane was unlit and single-track – not the kind of road you want to be driving down in the dead of night.

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There were passing places, though. He ignored the first one for being too close to the main road, but found a suitable alternative some 300 yards further along.

He pulled in, consulted the scrying device, and there she was – seated just a little behind him, because a Mercedes-Benz AMG A45 S Plus is 332mm longer than an MG MG3.

See how much research I do! You can definitely trust me.

Yes, I'm smiling smugly.

Cally got out and rewound the scryer a couple of seconds at a time until he reached the point at which Harris had come to a halt but not yet switched off the engine.

Her face looked gaunt and frightened. She was going through hell.

How old was she? 18? 19? Just a kid.

She might have shot three men some two and a half hours earlier at this point in the past, but Cally couldn't help but feel for her.

He checked her satnav. She was making for a cottage near Ulverston – another two hours' drive away.

It must have been rented as a bolthole for the gang to hide out in after robbing – and then presumably killing – David and Melanie. Events clearly hadn't gone to plan, but a bolthole's a bolthole, and she definitely needed one now. Waste not, want not, as Miss Marple is wont to say.

Cally got back into the yellow Mercedes. At least he now knew where he was going, even if he wouldn't get there until nearly eight o'clock.

He was afraid of what he might find when he did arrive. Many people who slay others – especially close relatives – are driven to take their own lives, too.

He shared the address in group chat then entered it into his satnav.

ETA under present traffic conditions: 19:57.

For once, the satnav's estimation wasn't far wrong. Although Cally lost some time from being stuck for ten miles behind a brick lorry going at 40mph along a 60mph road, he more than made it up by ... well let's just say that his satnav was rather too conservative in its estimation of how long it would take someone driving a vehicle chosen by Tally to negotiate sections of dual carriageway.

At ten to eight, Cally reached his destination: a former tied cottage surrounded by farmland at the end of what could fairly be described as a dirt track. He could see the Scotts' white MG3 parked on a gravelled yard in front of it, but kept his distance: he didn't want his approach to be heard, and he *did* want to block the only exit from the premises in case Harris fancied a car chase.

He tried to be quiet exiting the Merc, but it wasn't easy. People who buy expensive cars tend to like to hear a satisfying clunk when they shut the

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doors. He pressed it closed; that seemed to do the trick.

He had to decide how to make his way towards the cottage. He could go openly, as if he had nothing to hide, which would normally be his preference; however, he wasn't sure what Harris's state of mind might be – she could take a pot shot at him with neither cause nor warning. He therefore adopted a more cautious approach, crouching low and moving quietly on grass or earth whenever possible. If seen, it would be obvious that he was up to no good, but his *chance* of being seen was commensurately lower.

He made it to the cottage's exterior without attracting attention, at least as far as he could tell. To see him there, pressed against the wall, Harris would need either to put her face up against a window or to open the front door – that's if she wasn't wandering around outside, of course, possibly watching him.

If she was, Cally hadn't spotted her.

He did another visual scan, all the same.

Being located in the middle of central nowhere, the cottage had no need for blinds or net curtains. Privacy was less important than not spoiling the view. This meant that Cally would receive no notification if Harris suddenly decided to check for intruders; on the positive side, though, he'd be able to take a quick peek through a window to see what was going on inside.

He wondered what *would* be going on inside. How might Michayla Harris be occupying herself?

A number of alternatives sprang to mind: watching rolling news channels for developments in the murder investigation; getting hammered with alcohol, or out of her mind on narcotics; feverishly reading everything she could find on social media about the deaths in Helmsley; pacing around anxiously with her sixth cigarette of the hour, trying fruitlessly to think of a way out of the mess she'd got herself into. She could even have been asleep.

Lying dead on the floor having blown her own brains out nevertheless remained the most likely possibility.

The first window he sneaked a look through was the kitchen. She wasn't there.

The second was the lounge, and she was there. She was praying.

Cally had not considered that she might be praying.

Cally's view of religion was heavily influenced by the fact that he deemed the creator of this world, Paul, to be a dick – an opinion I share, incidentally. That said, he did acknowledge that many religious people are sincere in their beliefs, and that although in general you can't judge an entire religion by the actions of one individual, you're probably OK to do so if the individual in question is Buddha, Jesus or Mohammed.

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He watched for rather longer than he intended, but Harris kept her eyes closed and hands together, entirely unaware of his presence.

She had her shotgun – a side-by-side double-barrelled model – within very easy reach, unbroken, ready to fire.

He wasn't going to be able to stop her getting off at least one shot the moment she saw him.

He tested the front door.

It was locked – of course it was locked.

He checked the back door: the same.

One of the windows of what looked like a dining room was slightly ajar,

Cally took his Swiss Army penknife from the front of his bag, and slid the blade through the crack between the window frames to see if he could move the handle.

He could: it wasn't locked open.

The blade was too short to get the leverage he needed, but he could extend its effective length by opening up a nail file at the opposite end. This was difficult to hold, and he was worried that he might lose his grip and drop his tool, causing a racket. He didn't, though, and after a minute or so of patient pushing and prodding, he had the handle disengaged and the window open.

He cleared a space on the windowsill then climbed into the dining room.

He didn't actually tell me that he thought, "Try that in your dress, Tally!", but I'm sure he did.

He paused to decide whether or not to take his shoes off. Off: increased silence; on: quicker running speed.

He kept them on.

Besides, he *did* like those shoes.

As he slipped into the hallway, he thought he could hear speech. It was low, but when he stopped to listen he felt sure that Harris was saying something.

He reached the door to the lounge, which wasn't shut.

"Lord have mercy on me, a sinner. Lord have mercy on me, a sinner. Lord have mercy on me, a sinner. ..."

Harris was repeating it like a mantra, in a voice wrought with despair.

Cally had encountered nothing like this before.

He was unsure of how to proceed, but knew that he'd have to act sooner rather than later.

Sooner might as well be now, then.

With his back to the lounge wall, he pushed wide the door then quickly retracted his hand.

"I'm unarmed, I'm not the police, I just want to talk", he shouted.

The praying stopped. "Let me see you."

"Promise you won't shoot?"

"No."

"I'll have to take the risk then, won't I?"

It was a risk, too. Sure, Cally wouldn't have *died* from a chest full of 12-bore shot, but he'd have

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returned to Bhrēwā – as would Tally, Cleo and Miss Marple. That would have derailed everything.

"Who *are* you?" asked Harris, so nervously that Cally felt she might easily pull the trigger by accident.

"I'm Cally. I'm a friend of the Scotts."

"Who? – No, stay back!" Cally had inched forward. "Come any closer and I'll fucking shoot! I swear, I'll fucking shoot!"

Cally looked at the shotgun shaking in her hands."

"You know the safety catch is on, right?"

Harris glanced at her weapon, spotted the slider on the top of the receiver, then swiftly slid it forward, towards the muzzle.

The moment she did so, Cally sprang forward.

Harris fired, but to no effect.

Cally's right hook met her cheekbone and she crumpled backwards into the fireplace, releasing the shotgun as she did so.

Cally picked it up, broke it, and emptied out the cartridges.

Harris regained her self-awareness.

"Fucking bastard!" she spat. "You fucking tricked me!" Then, as if relieved of some great burden, she started to cry.

"Two correct statements, that's a good start", said Cally, calmly. "Listen, I meant what I said. I'm not here to hand you over to the cops, I'm just here to talk."



"It's OK, it's OK, I give myself up." She let loose a sob. "Do what you want with me, my life's good as fucking over anyway and I'm going to Hell."

"Tell me what happened – your name's Michayla, right? Tell me what happened, Michayla."

The tears were in full flow now. Still slumped in the fireplace, Michayla reached for her bag and took out a tissue. Cally let her; he could see she was in no mind to try anything rash.

"I killed three men. God, I killed three fucking men! My brother! My boyfriend! McIntyre! It was fucking awful."

"Why did you do it?"

"Cause they were fucking going to kill me."

"How did you know they were?"

"I don't fucking know – it just dawned on me." She was distraught, that much was obvious. "They didn't tell me what they were planning, I thought it was just a bit of ducking and diving, then suddenly it turned out it wasn't. Oh God, what have I fucking done?"

Cally remained unflustered, but he was starting to feel that there was more to this than there first appeared.

"Did they say they were going to kill you?"

Michayla wiped her nose. She was still crying. "Mark did, my boyfriend – my ex-boyfriend. He confessed. Soon as they had the rubies, they were going to off me. I didn't even *know* about any

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fucking rubies until they took the man away to get them."

"Why would they want to kill you? Greed?"

"McIntyre, maybe. Brendan because he fucking hates my guts. Mark because he was cheating on me with Kirsty fucking Thomas."

"Who's Kirsty fucking Thomas?"

"My sister! My fucking sister! Half-sister. Brendan's sister."

"Brendan's your half-brother? The one with the Man U tattoos?"

"He was, till I shot his head off." She gave a short, bitter laugh. "Safety catch was off *that* time."

"Was Mark aware that you knew he was cheating on you?"

"Why are you fucking asking me all this? Just turn me in. I killed three fucking men and I deserve to fucking die in prison."

Cally didn't have to ask any of this. He only needed to know what had happened to David and Melanie, and maybe David's papers. Michayla wasn't acting like a cold-blooded murderess *should* act, however; he felt she had a story to tell, and that this might be her only chance to tell it to someone who might believe her.

"I want to help you, but I can't do that until I've heard the facts. Did Mark know you knew he was cheating on him?"

She felt around and removed an ornamental horse brass she was sitting on. "No, Brendan's other sister, Lulu, told me. She's alright is Lulu –

not like fucking Kirsty." She put the horse brass down carefully, rather than toss it away.

"I see." He did see, too. "So, last night you were told to guard someone, a woman?"

"Yeah, Melanie something-or-other. They gave me a shotgun, told me to shoot her if she did anything funny. God, did she do something funny... "

"What?"

"Disappeared. She literally fucking DIS-APP-EARED. Along with the man, her husband. I was scared as shit! They just WENT! I thought I'd lost my fucking mind, almost shot my own fucking head off there and then."

"Why didn't you?"

"They disappeared! That's got to be God's doing, right? God's good, right? Like, the *definition* of good?" She was starting to regain a little of her composure. "I figured He wanted me to repent. No matter what you've done, no matter *what*, you can always be forgiven, can't you?"

"The three you shot: did they have a bag with them."

"Yes, I took it, I knew there wouldn't be rubies in it, Melanie said there wouldn't be, that there weren't any rubies. There had to be *something* of value in it, though, or it wouldn't have been kept in a fucking safe, would it?"

"There were papers and transparencies. What did you with them."

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"Burnt them, out back." She nodded her head in the vague direction of the rear of the cottage. "Except for the ones that wouldn't burn. They wouldn't cut, they wouldn't even fold. They wouldn't *anything!*"

She looked at Cally with a mixture of torment and desperation. "Am I going fucking mad?"

Cally didn't answer. "You burnt everything: why?"

"I read some, it spooked the fucking crap out of me. And it was evidence. Without the papers and shit, there was no proof I was ever there."

"What did you do with the papers that survived?"

"They're over, over ... ", she pointed loosely to a side table. "I tried to stab a hole through one with a kitchen knife, a good, pointy one. It wouldn't go through, not even a *single* fucking sheet! It's not thick paper, but it's like fucking bullet-proof or something. I hit the knife into it with a fucking shoe and it wouldn't go through. I thought, if I soaked one in water first it might soften up, but it didn't fucking *soak*. What the fuck is it *made of!*"

Cally went over and picked up the papers – Sarah's letters to David. They were all there.

He rolled them up and put them in his bag.

Michayla watched, but made no effort to flee.

"So let's see if I've got this straight", said Cally. "Take a seat, you look exhausted."

Michayla dragged herself to her feet and collapsed into an armchair. Cally took one opposite her.

"So, McIntyre – he was your boyfriend's boss?"

"Yes, a dealer, precious stones – you know, diamonds and stuff."

"So McIntyre got wind of someone in North Yorkshire who had a stash of extremely valuable gems that they were trying to sell, and he decided to avail himself of them."

"Yeah, he was strapped for cash, his wife had left him and she'd told the fraud squad he was fiddling the books, which he totally fucking was."

"The shotguns were his?"

"I guess. He did grouse shooting or something, hob-nobbing with the big boys. They're nothing to do with me, if that's what you were wondering – I'd never fired a gun in my fucking life before last night"

Cally could sense a deep, underlying sadness in Michayla. She was probably quite a pretty girl when she didn't have red-rimmed eyes, a developing bruise on her cheek, snot coming out of her nose and tear-stained make-up that had been badly applied in the first place.

"So McIntyre talked it over with Mark, and together they hatched a plan to go to Boroughbridge and steal the gems."

"Boroughbridge? We were in Helmsley."

"Where do you fit into this, then?"

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"Mark said he needed some muscle to do something a bit naughty, could I talk to Brendan about it. Brendan was up for it – course he was fucking up for it! He already fucking knew about it, because Mark was banging his fucking sister!"

"So McIntyre, Mark and Brendan were the players here. What was your role?"

"They wanted me to book the accommodation. Not with Airbnb, 'cause the web site wants an email address."

"Why you?"

"Brendan had a credit card he'd bought off a man in a pub, but it had a woman's name on it."

"Miranda."

"Yes, Mira – how do you know it was Miranda?"

"When you made that phone call, it was recorded."

She groaned. "God, I really *am* fucked, aren't I?"

"So you booked the place in Helmsley over the phone, booked this cottage here likewise, called the man whose house was going to be robbed – "

"I didn't know that was the plan, I swear! I thought they were just going to rough him up a bit, maybe not even that, just threaten to rough up his wife or something. I thought he'd have the rubies on him. I thought he was a shady dealer, like McIntyre."

"Do people in that line of work usually carry gems about their person?"

"I, I don't... ." Her voice tailed off.

"Did McIntyre?"

She started to tear up again. "God, what a fucking idiot..."

"What else did you do? Guard Melanie, anything other than that? Was it you who tied her up?"

"No, that was Brendan. I did nothing – oh! I made the Ivy Cottage sign." She seemed to be mildly proud of this achievement.

Cally tried to summarise. "So from your perspective, your boyfriend told you he had a deal going down and he was going to be rich – "

"Said we could get married. Fucking lying bastard."

"– so he asked you involve Brendan, who gave you a dodgy credit card and told you to book some accommodation with it. Come the big day, you printed off a fake Ivy Cottage sign, then made a call from a phone box."

"I was supposed to read some words from a card, but I got a bit nervous – I nearly forgot to fucking tell him to bring his wife."

Cally was more annoyed by the split infinitive than by the entire, liberal stream of profanities that was flowing so freely from Michayla's mouth.

"At ten o'clock, you were waiting in the cottage in Helmsley when suddenly, Mark, Brendan and McIntyre showed up with two prisoners."

Cally knew this wasn't true; he was testing Michayla's honesty.

"No, we were all there. The man – David! His name was David."

"David Scott, yes."

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"Well the man, David, and his wife, Melanie, came to us, we didn't go to them. Then the guns appeared. No-one had said *anything* about fucking guns."

"OK, so Brendan bound them both up using cable ties, then he and his chums discussed their plans – which was the first time you really understood what they had in mind."

"I said I wanted no part of it, those big houses, they have security and all sorts of shit – and the guns! I didn't sign up for no fucking guns."

Cally wasn't happy with the double negative, either, but pressed on.

"Then they took away David and left you to guard Melanie."

"Yes, they told me I was in too deep now, I had to shoot her if she tried anything funny – oh, I already said that, didn't I."

"*Would* you have shot her?"

"Not then, no, she was tied to a kitchen chair, a great big heavy thing. She was going fucking *nowhere*."

"You got chatting?"

"A bit, but I was thinking. Things didn't add up. Why bring me along and not Kirsty fucking Thomas? Then it hit me: once they had the rubies, they were going to kill David and Melanie to stop them talking, then they'd kill me and make it look like I'd murdered the other two."

"So when they got back with what you thought was a safeload of rubies – "



"I knew it wasn't rubies, Melanie was insistent."

"Whatever, when they got back, you were waiting for them and shot first."

"Christ, no! I might have been fucking wrong – but I was ready in case I wasn't, and I wasn't. Brendan came at me with that giant fucking zombie knife of his, thinking I wasn't expecting it, but was and I blew his fucking head off. I mean off. Then I blasted McIntyre because he was raising his shotgun to blow my fucking head off."

"Did Mark try to run, or did he go for McIntyre's weapon?"

"Neither, he was caught when I blasted McIntyre. I picked up McIntyre's shotgun – that's it, there – and I pointed it at him. He begged me to call an ambulance, but I said I wanted the truth about him and Kirsty fucking Thomas first, so he admitted it all. I asked if he'd been planning to kill me, and he said he had been, but now he saw how wrong he'd been and how much he truly loved me, the fucking piece of shit."

"Did you shoot him?"

"Not again, no. He suddenly went into some kind of convulsion, and then – well he looked fucking dead to me."

"Right", said Cally. "So basically you were duped, and you killed three men in self-defence, one of them – Mark – pretty well by accident."

"Well when you put it like that." She frowned. "Are you a fucking defence lawyer?"

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Cally remained impassive. He's excellent at keeping his emotions in check and not buckling under pressure. That isn't to say he *has* no emotions, though – he's full of them. Inside he felt nothing but pity for Michayla. She wasn't the brightest, but she had a good heart, and she'd been used by ... .

He remembered something else he knew about her; something he now realised had terrible implications.

"How old are you, Michayla?"

"19. I'll be 20 in December."

"Your middle name: it begins with A?"

"Andrea, yes. After my grandma."

"So you met Mark in 2018. Seven years ago."

"Yes."

"When you were twelve years old."

Michayla's eyes flared with reignited pain. Her bottom lip began to tremble, then she let out a short, agonised scream that cut Cally to his core.

She covered her face and sobbed into her hands.

Cally wanted to put his arm around her, but as a man he knew he couldn't do that. He accepts his lot.

He's practical, is Cally.

When she seemed to be over the initial wave, he spoke.

"So he didn't love you. He said he loved you, but he didn't. He", he hesitated, "he *made* love to you, but he didn't *love* you."

Michayla continued to weep inconsolably.

"I've never told anyone", he thought he heard her say. "Mark said he'd... "

"There's one last thing I need to know from you", said Cally. "What happened to David and Melanie?"

This and the whereabouts of David's papers were the *only* things he'd needed to know from her.

Michayla dropped her hands and shook her head, still looking downwards in shame. "I told you, they disappeared."

"Did they do anything before they disappeared?"

"Uh-huh."

Cally paused, to give her more space. "You were going to shoot them, weren't you?"

"I was", she looked towards him, "I mean, that's what was in my head, they'd just seen me kill three fucking people, but I didn't want to. They'd done nothing, nothing except see me ... they'd done nothing."

"But you didn't shoot them."

"David said he knew he had to die. He said he understood. He almost gave me permission to kill him. He just asked me for a favour, you know, before I did it. He asked to be allowed to kiss his wife one last time."

"You let him?"

"I could see he loved her. No-one's ever felt that way about me. I'm an accident! My mum had an affair; she never loved me. My dad, who wasn't my dad, never loved me either. Mark *said* he loved me,

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like fuck he did, but David – David really *did* love Melanie. I *had* to grant him his last fucking wish.”

“Did you cut him free first?”

“I cut them both free.”

“And they kissed?”

“That’s when they disappeared.”

Cally nodded. That was the answer he’d been expecting.

“Would you have shot them if they *hadn’t* disappeared?”

Michayla thought for a moment. “Head says yes, heart says no.” She sat up straight. “Heart wins. Heart should always fucking win.”

Cally displayed no feelings whatsoever. He maintained a neutral demeanour, even though Michayla’s story had saturated him with compassion.

She didn’t deserve this.

She didn’t deserve any of this.

“Who was the last person who got a good look at you before you went to Helmsley?” he asked.

“Er, I don’t know, someone in the car park at Tesco’s?”

“When was that?”

“Saturday. That’s when I do the weekly shop.”

“Where do you live?”

“Oldham – but I can’t fucking go back there. Why are you asking me all these questions? Can’t you leave me be?”

“Where *would* you live, if you could live anywhere?”

"Right now? As far away from here as fucking possible. Australia?"

Australia was normally Cleo's domain, but Cally knew a place.

"Let's see now, it's quarter past nine. Set your watch to 5:45 tomorrow morning."

"What? Why the fuck would I – "

"Because that's what time it is in the state of South Australia."

"What?"

"Just do it, Michayla."

She took off her watch and made the requested adjustment.

"Earlier, you were praying", said Cally.

"I thought God might hear me."

"You believe in God?"

"I do, yes." If she was embarrassed by the admission, she didn't show it. He was her only source of solace.

"You're done with the watch? OK, put it back on and come with me. Oh, and bring your bag."

Michayla was confused, but obeyed.

"I'll need the key to the vehicle you stole", said Cally. "We don't want anyone tracing it back to you."

Michayla gave it to him.

"Right, now we're going to my car. It's just a little way up the track."

"Fucking awful colour", laughed Michayla, when she saw it.

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"It goes from zero to a hundred kilometres in less than four seconds", replied Cally.

Cally does listen when Tally talks cars.

"Do you have a passport?"

"No – do I need one?"

"Have you ever been arrested?"

"No – I was caught once doing a bit of shoplifting, but they let me off 'cause I was like ten. Can you not walk so fucking fast?"

"Have you ever given blood?"

"What's that got to do with anything?"

"The fewer databases there are with biometric information about you, the better. Have you or any close relatives ever sent off DNA to a genealogy site?"

"Not me or my mum. Maybe my father, I don't know who he is."

"A common complaint." They reached the Mercedes. "OK, so they'll find out who you are eventually, but not immediately."

He opened the door and felt inside the glove compartment.

"Here", he said. "You'll need this."

"A torch?"

"It's dark where we're going. You'll also need this."

He handed her an enormous gemstone.

"Is this a ... ruby?"

"I like to keep one handy. It's yours. You'll have trouble persuading the police that it's not stolen, but they'll eventually have to concede it isn't. It's

about 60 carats; cut rubies that size are heavily documented, and they'll find that this is a new one. The courts will award it to you. It's worth about 30 million quid at auction, maybe 60 million Australian dollars. Accept half that value, you've no need to be greedy."

"I don't understand."

"You don't have to understand", said Cally, lifting her off the ground before she could stop him.

A moment later, he set her down at the lip of a very large hole in the ground in what looked, in the dark, like a desert.

"This is Koonalda Cave. You'll have to walk about fifty metres in that direction", he pointed, "to show up on the cameras. It's a bit early, but I expect it won't be long before someone spots you and a ranger comes to investigate. Oh, and give me your purse, you don't want anything on you that could be used as ID."

"My credit cards are – "

"Your phone, too, I'm afraid."

"My phone, but – !"

"I've just given you a gem worth 30 million and you won't hand over your phone?"

She looked at it. "I guess... I'll lose my *Wordle* streak."

Cally took off his jacket and checked there was nothing in the pockets. He put it round her shoulders. Deserts are cold places at night.

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"Choose a new name. Claim amnesia. You've no idea where you came from, why you're here or how you got here. The most you can say is that your prayers, whatever they were, must have been answered."

She touched her cheek where Cally had hit her, suddenly agog with wonder. "Are – are you an *angel*?!"

"Only if you think so."

He disappeared.

Two seconds later, he reappeared.

"Oh, and mind the spiders – they're beasts out here."

He disappeared again.

Michayla had never known love herself, but she knew it when she saw the bond between David and Melanie.

Cally hoped that one day, she'd see it in herself.

As for his seeing it in *himself*, well as I said, Cally accepts his lot. Cally is practical.

It was nearly half-past nine and he had to call a minicab to take him from Birkrigg Stone Circle to his car on the dirt track outside the former tied cottage the other side of Ulverston. It would take at least fifteen minutes for the cab to arrive, another twenty or so for it to take him to the cottage, and then another twenty for him to drive his car to Ulverston's 24-hour car park.

Then, he'd have to teleport to Birkrigg Stone Circle and repeat the exercise to recover the



Scotts' MG3. It would be 11:30 before he got back home.

He or Tally could drive the cars back to Boroughbridge after all this was over.

While he waited for the cab to arrive, he checked in with Miss Marple.

"They disappeared when their ties touched", he told her.

"Now that is interesting", she replied. "Have you read what Cleo found?"

"Not yet, he's written like an essay. I'll read it while I'm in the taxi."

"Have you tried calling Melanie's portable telephone yet? Even if she can't answer, she might hear it ring and divine that we're looking for her."

"I'll do that now."

He did, but it went to voice mail so he hung up.

## Chapter 8

### In which Cleo is Careful

Alone among our Muses, Cleo didn't mind making telephone calls to people who weren't expecting to receive them. He was also the one who got along with Mr Bright the least badly.

After Tally and Cally had left, he quickly read through the list Miss Marple had made of the documents that David had sought out, then tapped Mr Bright's number into his phone from memory.

Keeping the telephone number of a career spy in your address book is not good practice.

Mr Bright was not unsurprised to hear from Cleo, as the surveillance cameras set up to monitor the Scotts' residence had recorded some unusual behaviour at around 11pm the previous evening. Cleo explained that David and Melanie had gone missing, and that there were papers in the British Library archives at Boston Spa, near Wetherby, that might shed light on what had happened.

Mr Bright asked what could be done, Cleo told him, and Mr Bright averred that he would pull the necessary strings – adding that he hoped this small favour might be reciprocated at some point in the future.

Cleo didn't mention Marius's reappearance, and therefore had no need to point out that there

might well not *be* a future. That was a different problem.

Mr Bright instructed Cleo to arrive at the British Library's Yorkshire branch at 3pm.

Cleo thanked him, and the call ended on amicable terms.

At 2pm, Cleo had read through David's notes and changed into a smarter outfit. He was, however, anything but ready to set off for Wetherby.

"Do I have to drive there on my own?" he asked, apprehensively.

"I'm afraid so, Cleo", replied Miss Marple. "You know I can't come with you. It isn't very far, though, only fifteen miles; surely you can manage that."

"Fifteen miles, yes – ten which are down the A1. I don't like the A1 even as a passenger, but as a driver?" He shuddered. "I keep being overtaken by these enormous articulated lorries and it scares the wits out of me."

"If you didn't drive so slowly, Cleo, they wouldn't *need* to overtake you."

"But going fast frightens me, too!"

"Perhaps, but you don't have to tolerate that for quite as long because you reach your destination so much quicker."

Cleo, sighed.

So did Miss Marple. "Sometimes, Cleo, I wonder if you're not perhaps a young woman."

"I'm definitely a man, Miss Marple."

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"Only, I can't imagine Cally or Tally making such a fuss. They'd just get on with it."

"I assure you that I'm male", said Cleo, firmly.

"Tally's the one who flirts with men, not me."

"Yet Tally is the most male of all of you."

"Really?" Cleo wasn't at all persuaded. "When we were questioned by a police officer this morning, Tally batted his eyes at him, smiled coyly, touched his hair – the officer stood no chance. I was horrified – I'd never have been able to do that! I could see Cally wincing at it, too, yet Tally was absolutely shameless."

"Tally doesn't watch young men go by, he watches young women go by. Have you never noticed?"

"I have, yes – but that doesn't alter the fact that he still flaunts his looks at men."

"He does, but he's not attracted to them. I doubt that he'd know what to do if one such specimen were to respond to his coquettishness seriously."

"Then why – "

"– because, Cleo, he knows that his yearnings for women can never be met. He only flirts with men to experience a dim reflection of what he aches for; but still, a dim reflection is better than nothing. It's vicarious, you see: he imagines *himself* to be the young man chatting to the pretty girl. Perhaps, sometimes, he hopes that if he does it sufficiently often, he'll grow to like men as much as he likes women. Unfortunately, the opposite

occurs: it only stiffens his interest in women more. That's why he's so sad inside."

"Sad? Tally? Tally's full of fun, full of life!"

"Tally is the joker among you, and like many jokers he hides his sorrow with laughter. He's melancholy, so he counteracts that by being cheerful. He adores women, so he counteracts that by sweet-talking men. You see? It's the same thing."

"But – "

"Cleo, dear, I was written to be an excellent judge of character, and am true to my author's vision in that regard. Now are you going to drive to Wetherby or not?"

Cleo conceded defeat.

"Let's have a look at you", said Miss Marple. "I like your choice of lipstick. Oh, but you've got that twisted." She straightened his necklace. "Now, don't be tempted to answer your portable telephone while you're driving, it'll only panic you."

"Yes, Miss Marple", replied Cleo, obediently.

He smiled. He rather liked it when Miss Marple fussed over him.

"You remember which documents are the ones you must read?"

Did I mention that when Miss Marple listed the documents that Cleo needed to see, she included some red herrings? I don't think I did.

Miss Marple can be quite calculating at times.

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"Yes, I remember", said Cleo. "You know, Miss Marple, perhaps if you didn't treat me like a girl, you wouldn't think I was one."

Cleo shouldered his bag, kissed Miss Marple on the cheek, then left for his Renault Clio.

Well of course he drives a Clio. Clio was the name of the Greek Muse whose name Miss Marple adapted for him.

He sat at the wheel, took a deep breath, and started the engine.

So, you know how sometimes you'll be driving along merrily only to get stuck behind a Volvo pulling a caravan, whereupon you rage about the driver holding you up, but then it turns out the Volvo is in turn stuck behind a small, unnaturally clean car going barely faster than a bicycle?

Cleo is the driver of that small, unnaturally clean car.

After a nerve-wracking 45-minute drive that would have taken Tally 20, Cleo arrived at the British Library. A friendly security officer checked his name against a list, then let him through the barrier and directed him to the visitors' car park.

Once there, Cleo breathed a huge sigh of relief. His ordeal was over – at least until he had to repeat it for the drive home.

Teleportation was so much less stressful.

He presented himself at reception, where he was handed an envelope containing a reader pass on a BL-branded lanyard, accompanied by a list of do's and don'ts and instructions on what to do in

the event of a fire. Happily, unlike the vast interior space that houses almost all the national collection of newspapers and manuscripts, along with most of its books, the reading room is not immediately flooded with carbon dioxide when a fire is detected.

Cleo was asked to wait a few minutes until his assistant arrived. He hadn't been expecting an assistant, but supposed that the term was a euphemism for 'minder'.

It was a young man, dressed smartly in a suit and tie, carrying a clutch of folders with handwriting on them that looked straight out of the 1930s.

"Miss Brewer?" he asked, holding out his hand. "I'm Tom Metcalfe, I'll be helping you with your fact-finding."

"Call me Cleo", replied Cleo, accepting his handshake.

"We're supposed to refer to clients using their surname, Miss Brewer", said Tom. "It's more professional."

"Then I shall call you Mr Metcalfe", said Cleo, smiling.

He looked pleasantly surprised at this, and smiled in return.

"This way to the reading room", he said. "We have a private booth arranged, so we can discuss your needs without disturbing other visitors."

Cleo followed him. "This is much more attention than I was expecting", he said. "I thought

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I'd just be pointed at a computer and told to get on with it."

He laughed. "No, we have the originals for you. Have you never been here before?"

"No, I don't really like the drive", replied Cleo.

"Did you come up from London?"

"No, down from Boroughbridge."

He chuckled. "My, my, you *really* don't like the drive!"

Cleo took this as a joke, and was about to pout in response but caught himself in time. When not among friends, pouts can be misconstrued.

Tom ran his pass key over an RFID pad on the wall and gestured for Cleo to go inside.

He didn't say "ladies first", but that was his manner. I can tell, I'm attuned to these things.

"You're not as old as I was expecting", he said, once he'd closed the door behind them and they were free to talk. "Most of the people sent by government agencies are at least in their thirties, and most are in their forties or fifties."

Cleo looked around. There were two desks, one of which had a box of books and papers on it and the other of which boasted a computer – annoyingly, a Mac. Like David and Melanie's benefactor, Eugene Nethercott, Cleo is not a fan of Apple products.

There were two office chairs at each desk and a water dispenser and coffee machine against the wall – with proper cups, too, not cardboard ones.

"This is nice and cosy", he said, approvingly.



Tom opened one of the desk drawers and produced some cotton gloves. "These look about your size. You'll need them for handling the older manuscripts. Take off any – oh, you're not wearing any rings."

Cleo donned the handwear.

The first thing he was going to do when all this was over was buy a wedding ring. That would stop random men from thinking he was available.

That said, while affable, Tom didn't seem to show any signs of being interested in him, which was a relief. Neither was he emitting any signals of being gay, however, so Cleo resolved to stay on his guard, just in case.

"Can I get you a coffee or a tea before you start?" asked Tom.

"Tea would be lovely", replied Cleo.

Miss Marple has brought up her young charges well.

He wondered if he needed to pay for the drink, but Tom seemed to sense his concern. "Don't worry", he said, "it's on the house. So are you doing a PhD or something?"

"A PhD?" Cleo was confused. "I don't even have a Bachelor's."

"Really?" He pressed a few buttons on the machine and laughed to himself. "I don't know why I'm so surprised, I don't have a degree either. I was going to go to uni, but COVID came along and, well, ... ." His voice trailed off.

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Cleo looked at the books and papers assembled in the box. The top one was on his list of documents to read: a small pamphlet entitled *The History of Jack and the Spread-Cloth*.

He carefully picked it up and opened it.

"There are good collections of chapbooks in the Bodleian", said Tom, bringing over a mug and a coaster. "Could you just slide out the tray from the desk, please? Accidents do happen, and we don't want any 300-year-old manuscripts dousing in tea."

Cleo pulled out the tray for him, and he set down the beverage.

He seemed annoyed with himself. "Oh – so sorry, I should have asked: is a mug OK? I can fetch a cup and saucer if –"

"A mug is quite alright, Mr Metcalfe", said Cleo, reassuringly.

He wished that this remark hadn't made him sound like a character out of a Jane Austen novel.

"Toilets are at the end of the corridor to the right if you need them." Tom paused and frowned for a moment. "Or to the left, come to think of it."

Cleo smiled. "I'm sure I shall be fine."

"I'll let you settle in, then", breezed Tom, moving to the desk with the computer on it but not actually sitting at said computer. "I'm completely at your disposal; just ask if you need anything – anything at all. I have some projects of my own I can work on quietly in the meantime, but don't

hesitate to interrupt me if you have need of my services."

"I *shall* hesitate", replied Cleo, "but will endeavour to overcome my hesitation."

Tom seemed to find this amusing, but opened one of his folders rather than reply.

Cleo read this as professionalism. He hoped it wasn't shyness that would be overcome later.

He turned his attention to the pamphlet.

It wasn't in great condition, but then chapbooks rarely are, being of flimsy manufacture using cheap materials. The print was still eminently readable, however, so Cleo read it.

The tale concerned a young man called Jack (most English folk tales star a young man called Jack) who after winning a battle of wits with a speaking ass (who in Cleo's opinion was a metaphor for whoever was ruining the reader's life) found himself in possession of a magic spread-cloth.

The properties of the spread-cloth were such that anything put on top of it, whatever its weight, would weigh nothing when the cloth was drawn together as a bundle. Furthermore, when feeling the bundle from the outside, it was as if it were empty. When it was spread out, however, its contents magically reappeared.

In the story, Jack had many adventures, culminating with the rescue of a beautiful princess (it's always a beautiful princess) from a witch's captivity. Jack and the princess were wed, and

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although the story didn't use the exact words "they lived happily ever after", that's nevertheless what they did.

It was basically Aarne-Thompson-Uther type 569, *The Magic Object Conceals and Produces*.

I told you, I do my research.

Cleo cleared his throat, to announce that he was about to speak, then asked Tom if photographing the book was allowed; Tom confirmed that it was, so long as Cleo didn't use a flash.

Cleo didn't use a flash, and after snapping each page for future reference sent a short report to group chat:

D and M have an artefact from Bwnm

Anything wrapped inside it disappears until unwrapped

He went on to the next volume in the box.

This was a compendium of the lives of the saints, which was one of the red herrings Miss Marple had added to the list. It was in Latin, which Cleo understood, but he put it aside and searched for something from his to-read list.

He glanced over at Tom, who was poring over a scan of a sheet of paper written in a language Cleo recognised.

"Are you interested in old Coptic, Mr Metcalfe?" he asked, his natural curiosity overcoming his reluctance to speak to strangers.

Not expecting the question, Tom looked up. "I'm, er, ploughing through it." He pointed at a translation dictionary he'd brought with him.

"There can't be more than six or seven hundred examples of old Coptic in existence", said Cleo, although he knew of a thousand more in a tomb as-yet undiscovered.

"I'm exploring how and what the ancients thought of magic."

"Aren't complete translations readily available of all known old Coptic texts?"

"Of course", he replied, but where's the fun in reading any of those?"

Cleo smiled; he could appreciate the sentiment. "Well if you need help with any words, just ask."

Cleo, you see, always tries to be helpful.

"You understand old Coptic?" His voice betrayed a mixture of incredulity and awe.

Cleo moved his chair, which was on wheels, adjacent to Tom's. "I flew in to Pellonia. I came out of an iron door. I found a beautiful woman, red-lipped and dark-eyed, sitting on a high throne. I desired her, I cried out saying' – OK, well perhaps I'll stop there."

"I'm impressed", said Tom, quite genuinely. "When did you learn old Coptic?"

"Oh, I don't remember" said Cleo, which was entirely truthful.

"Do you know any other ancient languages?"

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"Only from Africa and South Asia. Oh, plus Latin. And Greek. Er, and old English, old German and old French."

Tom shook his head, but he was smiling – probably in disbelief. "How's your pre-classical Arabic?"

"Up to scratch?" Cleo was beginning to regret having offered his assistance.

"What do you make of this?" Tom handed him an enhanced photograph of markings on a rock face.

Cleo looked. "The first four lines are in Aramaic. Only the last two lines are in Arabic. "They do not redeem nor leave a trace, so be here, death seeks us, I do not seek it from here, add its wound, do not return us'."

Tom frowned. "You know this is the 'En 'Avdat inscription, right?"

Cleo shrugged. "I don't know what it is, I'm just telling you what it says."

"Most translations of it are ... more poetic."

"Not all that people believe is poetry is poetry", replied Cleo. He was getting irritated now. "You asked my opinion, I gave it. Can I get on with what I need to do here, now, please?"

He rolled his chair back into position and looked at the next document.

Tom was clearly embarrassed.

Cleo felt bad for him. "Sorry, I didn't mean to snap", he said. "It's just that this is important."

"It's quite alright, Miss Brewer", said Tom. "I'm afraid I let my enthusiasm get the better of me. Let me know if you need anything."

Cleo read the next document.

This one was an unbound collection of handwritten pages, one of which was missing, telling a tale entitled *The Brave Knight and the Consequences of his Bravery*. The script was difficult to read, but with some effort Cleo was able to make sense of it.

In the story, a company of knights made camp beside a lake and went to sleep. A group of nymphs came out of the lake to look at them. The captain of the knights woke up and all the nymphs fled, except for one who tarried because she'd fallen in love with him. He in turn fell in love with her. Noticing that his men were stirring, the nymph tore her girdle lengthways and gave the captain one of the two halves. She said to meet her there in a year's time, then she dived into the water to avoid being seen.

A year passed by, during which the captain had lots of adventures on the missing page, then he returned alone to the lake. The nymph reappeared and the pair declared that were still very much in love. Sadly, they knew that they couldn't live among humans, because nymphs and their magicks aren't widely tolerated. The captain said that he would live among the nymphs instead, so they tied their halves of the girdle together in a love knot and disappeared into her world.

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The captain came out of the nymph's world every so often, so he could see his ageing parents. This is how the narrator of the story heard about what had happened.

This is basically ATU 400, *The Man on a Quest for his Lost Wife*, although it shares some aspects with ATU 408, *The Three Oranges*.

If you're interested, look them up. If you're not, don't.

Cleo took it to be an allegory of love: committing your life to another person is an act of bravery. Faint heart never won fair lady.

Cleo knew he was faint-hearted, but then he knew he would never win a fair lady anyway so it didn't matter.

All ladies are fair, by the way. You can't judge people by appearances. Trust me, I know this only too well.

Cleo sent another quick summary to group chat:

Some (wrapper?) artefacts can be split in two  
Rejoining causes things to disappear  
Maybe instance, maybe phase, maybe layer  
D and M did this?

He took the next document from the box. This was a scroll, so he couldn't tell whether it was on his to-read list or his to-pretend-to-read list.

Tom saw him remove it. "I should probably give you a hand with that", he said, looking in the



drawer of the desk he was using. "I'll spread it out; if you could put these cotton-padded paperweights on the corners, that should make it easier."

Cleo supposed that spreading out old scrolls required special training that he hadn't had, a conclusion that was proven correct by the rather counter-intuitive way that Tom did it.

Cleo did explain Tom's technique to me, but not very well. I shall therefore spare you the details. It is worth pointing out, however, that Tom helped from the opposite side of the desk to where Cleo sat, not the same side. A woman, or a different kind of man, might have moved next to Cleo to do it, but Tom didn't.

I wonder why not?

Ooh, I *can* be such a tease.

The unscrolled scroll was not a folk tale. It was a will.

"Well that's unusual", said Tom. "Wills are normally held in church or county archives. There must be something different about this one."

Cleo was scanning through it. The preamble was the usual sound-of-mind-and-body stuff, but it was followed by a number of what would have been paragraphs had the will-writer acknowledged the concept of paragraphs and not left the whole document except for the signatures as a single block of text. The primordial paragraphs could nevertheless be identified, because they all began with the word 'Item'.

One of them was Not Like The Others.

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Cleo read it aloud. "Item. I give and devise my best milking cow and the contents of my late wife's coffer to my daughter Beth Hobb of the Glade to be delivered by taking the cow to Willow Wood and placing the adornments that are within the coffer about the beast. The silk cloth that wraps the adornments is to be placed on the back of the beast and the executor is to retreat before removing the companion cloth from the lower drawer of the coffer and casting the said cloth at the cloth on the back of the said beast to be repeated until the two said cloths touch. Under no circumstance is the executor to be holding either said cloth when it makes contact with the other for then ill shall befall him."

"It's a spell?" asked Tom.

Cleo took a photograph of the relevant section, but didn't send anything to group chat. The instructions had added nothing new.

"It's one of the things I was looking for", he said, "but it's not a spell. Can I just ask, is being an assistant what you normally do here?"

"Yes, but I'm not the only one, of course. Most of the time I help people with various disabilities – that's the main purpose of these private booths – but at short notice I can be called upon to assist someone more high-profile, such as you."

"Only, half of these items were read by a colleague of mine last week or the week before, and I wondered if you might remember him."

"Sorry, I haven't seen any of these manuscripts before", confessed Tom. "I did know they'd been accessed recently, though, because they were still awaiting return to storage."

Tom's accent, by the way, could accurately be described as 'broad Yorkshire': it made absolutely no concessions to received pronunciation. When he said "I did know they'd been", it sounded more like "Ah did no thed bin". Cleo quite liked it. It sounded honest and authentic.

He looked at the time. "How long do we have before you shut?"

Tom checked his watch. "Only half an hour, the reading rooms close 4:30. Sorry."

"I'd better get a move on, then!"

"Have you finished with this?" Tom gestured to the will.

"Yes, thank you." He finished off his tea as Tom scrolled the document back up.

The next two sets of papers in the box were red herrings. The third was on the to-read list, but it looked to Cleo as if it represented a line of enquiry that wouldn't pay off.

Of the remaining documents, two seemed possibly relevant. Cleo photographed them both, then quickly read the shorter one. It was another folk tale, *The Thread of Gold*.

Here's how Cleo related it to me.

Once upon a time, and a long time ago it was, there lived a beautiful princess. She was courted by

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many fine princes, but all were arrogant and vain, and she didn't like any of them.

One day, she was visited by an old woman of great wisdom, who presented to her a golden thread. "I give this to you", she said. "While it is yours, no man can break it in two."

The princess was confused by this, because the thread of gold was very fine – as fine as the threads of her golden hair. To test it, she asked her father, the king, if he could break it in two, but he could not. He tried to cut it using his knife, but he could not. He tried to slash it using his sword, but he could not. Finally, he tried to chop it using his axe but, he could not.

"Your mother was fae", he proclaimed. "This thread of gold is a gift from her people. Whosoever is able to break it, he shall you marry."

Word soon got around. Many men came to the castle to try to break the golden thread, but none succeeded. Fine princes, rich merchants, and even beggars from other tales attempted it, but the thread of gold simply would not break.

One day, a young man came to the castle to sell woollen fleeces for the winter's nights. Unlike every other young man who visited, he did not request to be allowed to try to break the thread of gold. The princess was an inquisitive young woman, so asked him why he didn't want to try. He told her that he had fallen in love with her at first sight. The princess was confused, because to her it seemed that this would be a very good reason to

want to break the thread of gold. The young man explained that his attempt to break the thread of gold would surely fail like everyone else's. That would end his dream that one day she might marry him. If he didn't try, he still had that hope.

The princess felt sad for the young man. He was sincere and truthful, and she did rather like him. She didn't love him, however, so bought a fleece and sent him on his way.

The next winter, the man returned with more fleeces to sell. Again, he didn't ask to break the thread. Again, he treated the princess with courtesy and honour. Again, she bought a fleece from him, which she didn't really need because she still had the one she'd bought the previous year; but he was kind and thoughtful and she felt her heart warming a little towards him – but she still didn't love him.

The winter after, the young man came to the castle again. He remained the soul of politeness and decency. He was nothing like the many men who had tried and failed to break the thread of gold in the months since his last visit.

The princess had often watched these proud men fail, and each time one did her thoughts turned towards the fleece-seller, who was so unlike them. She thought about him in the spring and in the summer and in the autumn when the leaves turned red and gold. When he visited again in the winter, she realised that she, too, had fallen in love.

"Do you think of me often?" she asked.

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"Every day", he replied.

"Do you still love me?" she asked.

"I always will", he replied.

"Then I grant you this", she said, and handed him the thread of gold.

He was heartbroken by the gift, for he thought that, to be kind, the princess was forcing him to give up his fancy of marrying her.

"I shall attempt to break your thread of gold out of love for you", he said, tears welling in his eyes.

"Then when I fail, you need never concern yourself with me again."

"It's my thread of gold no longer", replied the princess. "I have given it to you. The way to break it is not through force, but through love."

The young man took the thread of gold and snapped it with ease.

A month later, the young couple married in a beautiful ceremony with much feasting, and they lived happily together for the rest of their days.

This doesn't fit any ATU classification very well. It falls under the general category of *Impossible Tasks*, but matches no specific motif. That's sometimes the way with folk tales.

I never claimed to be good at research.

Cleo saw the tale as allegory of love, but one that contained a grain of a different truth.

He sent a brief update to group chat:

Bwnm-owned artefacts in possession of mortals  
are indestructible

Like Sarah's notes

Destructible if given away by owner

D and M's artefact a Bwnm creation

So if split in two was abandoned or discarded

When he finished, he looked up.

Tom seemed to be coming out of a state  
approximating shock.

"Are you quite alright, Mr Metcalfe?"

"Yes, er, sorry, Miss Brewer", he took a few deep  
breaths. "I shouldn't have read the story; it was  
very unprofessional of me."

"You read it upside-down?"

Cleo looked at the manuscript, then at Tom,  
then back at the manuscript.

"There's someone you love, but it's not  
reciprocated?"

"She's well out of my league", said Tom, red-  
faced. "Still, not to worry, I'll live."

He seemed to cheer up, but Cleo felt that deep  
within him the sadness remained.

Was this what Miss Marple had meant when  
talking about Tally?

Tom felt a vibration in his pocket and removed  
his phone. Looking at the caller ID, his eyes  
widened.

"Excuse me, I'd better take this", he said,  
removing one of the cotton gloves he was wearing.

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Cleo listened-in while neatly putting the documents he'd taken out back in their box.

"Hello? ... Yes ... Oh. ... When? ... How is she? ... Do you know what happened? ... OK, thanks, yes, I'll be there as soon as I can."

He put down his phone and removed his other glove.

"Some kind of family emergency?" asked Cleo, taking off his own gloves, too, and setting them on the desk.

"My mum's had a bad turn, it's serious. I'm sorry, I need to go." He picked up his phone again.

"Oh dear, will she be alright?"

He brought up a number from his address book. "It's not looking good."

Someone answered. Cleo heard Tom's side of the conversation again. "Hi, I need a taxi to take me to Leeds General as soon as possible ... Well when? ... Forty minutes?! It's an emergency! My – ... OK, OK, I'll try someone else, thanks."

Cleo realised that Tom didn't drive to work. "I can give you a lift", he offered.

"I – ". Tom seemed conflicted. "Could you? Only..."

"It's not a problem", Cleo reassured him. "How far is it?"

"I don't know, fifteen, twenty miles?"

"Do whatever you need to do here, then I'll take you.."

"Are you sure?"

"Get a move on!" Cleo smiled.



"Thanks – thanks, Miss Brewer. If you'd be so kind as to wait at reception, I just need to tell my boss I'm leaving early." He opened the door and hurried away.

Cleo quickly checked that he had all his belongings, then made his way to the building's entrance.

It wasn't long before Tom joined him, and the two went to Cleo's Clio.

"I don't know how to thank you for this", said Tom. "From what the nurse said, my mum had some kind of seizure, but she managed to press her pendant alarm before she fell unconscious. The paramedics stabilised her and took her to A&E, but I was told to prepare for the worst."

Cleo had already entered the address of Leeds General Infirmary into his phone's satnav, so as soon as it paired with the Clio's system he was ready to go.

Despite his misgivings about driving close to the speed limit, Cleo accepted that he was going to have to man up and ignore his nerves.

It didn't actually feel like manning up, though. It felt more like growing up .

The security barrier raised and he passed through the gate.

The satnav's impassive female voice told him to turn left at the first junction, so he did.

They were on their way.

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"Tell me about your mother", said Cleo, hoping to give Tom something to focus on that wasn't about her seizure.

"Her name's Jill. She's been in a wheelchair most of her life, she fell from a fairground ride when she was six and lost the use of her legs. She didn't think she could ever have children; I was something of a miracle baby."

"What happened to your dad?" Cleo sensed that he was no longer around.

"COVID. He died, and care of my mum passed to me. That's why I didn't go to uni. It's only light, what I have to do for her, I can hold down a job – so can she, she does customer service for Barclay's – but it means I'm tied to the house."

Another man might have commented on how tiresome that must be, but not Cleo. "She's your mum", he said.

"God, I hope she's alright", said Tom.

Cleo took the A58 rather than the A1, not because he wanted to avoid the A1 but because his satnav adjudged the A58 to be quicker.

"If she wears a pendant, she must have a serious long-term condition."

"Yes, heart failure. Sitting all the time is bad for the circulation."

"Well, hospital is the best place for her right now. She'll be in good hands."

The conversation stopped while Cleo negotiated a busy roundabout.

"What about you?" asked Tom, tentatively.

"What do you want to know?" asked Cleo.

"I'm sorry, I'm prying." He seemed embarrassed.  
"Please, forget I asked."

Cleo could now see why Tom might have identified with the fleece-seller in the folk tale.

He smiled. "I live in Boroughbridge with my two sisters, Cally and Tally. Cally is the eldest, I'm the youngest. Cally likes to paint, landscapes mainly. Tally likes to play games; she really should be streaming herself, she's a natural. As for me, I read a lot of books."

"You're a civil servant?" He twitched his cheeks as he chastised himself. "There I go again."

"No, it's fine, I'm happy to talk, it might help take your mind off, well, you know."

"I do need that right now. Heck, I hope she's not deteriorating. The hospital hasn't called back, so no news is good news, eh?"

"I'm not a civil servant", answered Cleo, "but I know one and he agreed to help. Two of my friends have gone missing under mysterious circumstances and we're trying to find out what happened to them."

"How mysterious are these circumstances?"

"Did you see in the news about that triple shooting in Helmsley?"

"Were they involved in that?"

"They were being held prisoner in the cottage where it happened. There should have been two more bodies, but there weren't. There's no sign of them. Cally's tracking down the murderer; I was

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looking for clues regarding what our friends had been researching. Tally can't do much right now as she's on a flight to Tenerife."

"That does sound mysterious, yes."

Cleo checked the rear-view mirror, and in the corner of his eye noticed that Tom was staring at him intently, albeit with something of a puzzled expression.

"What is it?" he asked.

Tom moved his head from side to side a little. "Well you were wearing those glasses for reading, and now you're wearing them for driving, but they don't appear to be varifocals. If anything, I'd say they were plain glass."

Cleo gave a short, laugh. "You got me!" he said. "I just wear them to look more intellectual. Do you prefer them on", he pushed them on top of his head, "or off?"

"You're you either way", he replied.

Cleo was initially a little affronted, given that at least once a week Tally told him that he looked much cuter without them.

Wasn't it better that Tom saw past them, though?

On the journey, Cleo and Tom chatted some more. Cleo forgot his driving nerves, being more concerned with Tom's state of mind. The young man was very, very worried. Cleo grew to like him: he wasn't pretending to be anyone or anything he wasn't, and what he was was kind and attentive

and sensitive. He'd make someone a good husband some day.

Hospital car parks are invariably full and expensive, especially during visiting hours, and they open and close at weird times. Fortunately, the council-operated Woodhouse Lane car park that's a five-minute walk away from Leeds General is 24-hour, so this is where Cleo parked.

He had a feeling that he wouldn't be returning to Boroughbridge for several hours at the very least.

They made their way to reception, asked which ward Mrs Jill Metcalfe was on, and were told it was cardiac intensive care unit L4 on floor C of the Jubilee wing.

Tom said he could take it from here. Cleo begged to differ, and accused him of putting politeness ahead of his well-being. Tom succumbed and expressed his gratitude. Cleo said he'd stay for as long as necessary, then he'd take Tom home or wherever he wanted to go.

Tom's mother was in a side room. The blinds were closed, but there was a pane in the door through which she could be observed.

She looked in an awful state. Cleo was horrified, and could only imagine the effect that Tom's mum's condition was having on her son.

"Can we go in?" Tom asked.

"Sorry, only one visitor at a time", said the nurse.

"She's that bad, then."

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"She's comfortable."

"How long has she got."

"I really can't say."

"Days?"

The nurse said nothing.

"Hours, then. I see."

"I'll wait out here", said Cleo.

"Thanks", said Tom, preparing himself. "I'm grateful. This is going to be hard."

The nurse opened the door and he went inside.

Cleo found a place to sit in a waiting area.

He'd never experienced anything like this before. He'd seen countless people die, some of whom he'd grown quite fond of, but *nothing* like this. Tom loved his mother, yet he knew she was dying. She probably wouldn't last the night. Even so, he wanted to be with her, to comfort her, to watch over her, despite the pain, despite the distress he was causing himself, because he *loved* her. The sheer humanity of the man was breathtaking.

Cleo remembered that he was supposed to be helping to discover what had happened to David and Melanie.

He took out his phone and typed a much longer explanation of his findings for Cally, Tally and Miss Marple to mull over.

He also said he didn't expect to be home until late late late as he was playing taxi driver for someone whose mother was about to breathe her last.

Looking through the messages the others had sent, Tally hadn't reported anything new. Cally had sent updates in patches, but looked to be closing in on Michayla Harris. Cleo worried that his big sister might be greeted by a close-range blast from a shotgun; Cally was brave, rather than foolhardy, but would a murderer make the distinction?

Oh, and yes, Cleo *did* think of Cally as a sister, rather than a brother. He didn't know why: he just did.

He checked on Tom through the window. He was tearful, but talking to his mother. Whether she was listening or not was hard to tell.

Cleo looked at the time: ten to eight. Visiting hours ended at eight, but an exception would surely be made for Tom. Nurses have a modicum of discretion, and they wouldn't be in the job if they weren't kind-hearted.

Eight o'clock came and went without a mention from the hospital staff. There'd been a shift change at seven, but the precarious condition of patient Jill Metcalfe in the side room had been fully conveyed.

"Would you like a cup of tea and a biscuit?" asked one of the nurses. "You must be famished."

"Oh, yes please", said Cleo, realising that he hadn't had a thing to eat since he'd returned from Bhrēwā around lunchtime. "Can I ask Tom if he wants one?"

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He'd wanted to call him Mr Metcalfe, but that didn't really seem right when the poor man was at his most vulnerable.

"You want to talk to him, don't you?"

Cleo nodded.

The nurse smiled. "Oh, go on then! Be quick, mind."

"Thank you, thanks", said Cleo, and went into the side room.

"How is she?" he asked.

Tom looked up. "Sleeping, I think."

His face was drained. "And you?" asked Cleo.

"How are you?"

"I've felt better." He tried to smile, but couldn't really manage it.

"There's a cup of tea and a biscuit on offer if you want one."

"That would be welcome, yes please", he said, rising to his feet.

"It's OK, you can stay with her, I'll bring it. Milk, no sugar?"

"How did you guess?"

"You didn't ask me how I liked my tea, but you were right all the same. How did you guess?"

This time, he did manage a full smile.

"Have you been outside all this time?" He checked his watch. "Goodness, it's half-past eight!"

"Yes. I promised I'd wait, didn't I?"

"Ahem", said the nurse.

"Oops!" Cleo stretched his bottom lip wide, guiltily. "Sorry – I'll be back soon."



He closed the door.

"How's he holding up?" asked the nurse.

"As well as can be expected for a man waiting for his mother to die right in front of him."

"It's a sad time. We'll check in on him from time to time – you'll do likewise?"

"Yes", promised Cleo.

"It won't be necessary for long, I fear."

The tea was from an urn, but the biscuits were the nurses' own. Cleo offered to pay, but was told not to be silly.

He went back to Tom with some on a paper plate.

"It's not exactly a banquet", he said, handing them over along with the mug of tea.

Tom's mother looked grave.

"I'll be here", said Cleo. "Outside, I mean; they won't let me stay with you. One visitor only and all that."

Tom's eyes said that he really, really wished that Cleo could stay with him, but that he knew it was hopeless.

"This must be boring for you", he said. "You offered to help a stranger, and now you're trapped on a hospital ward while he watches his mother ebb away."

"Don't you *dare* think of me!" scolded Cleo. "This is about you and your mother, not me, not anything else. You're the most important people here. The rest of us are extras with non-speaking parts."

## Bhrēwā

"You're not wearing your glasses."

"They steam up when I drink tea that hasn't cooled down enough."

"Ahem", said the nurse.

Cleo retreated.

Every fifteen minutes or so, Cleo popped in to see how Tom was doing.

Every fifteen minutes or so, Cleo's heart went out to him.

Every fifteen minutes or so, Cleo left with an increased sense of Tom's devotion.

It didn't occur to him that Tom's sense of Cleo's devotion might also have increased.

At around ten, there was a flurry of activity as two doctors appeared, both men.

They went into the side room. Cleo watched through the door window as they examined the traces from various instruments, then showed Tom what were probably test results.

Tom slumped, nodded, and thanked them.

They left him alone with the patient.

Cleo intercepted them. "How is she?" he asked, worried for Tom.

"She's too weak to operate. The anaesthetic would kill her. I'm sorry, but there's nothing we can do."

Cleo looked through the door window again. Tom was distraught, but was saying something to his mother through his tears.

"Is she conscious."

"For now."

"I have to be with him."

"It's a small room, and the equipment is very sensitive. Two visitors means twice as much carbon dioxide and – "

"What does *any* of that matter?!" Cleo was outraged. "Look at him! His mother is about to *die*, and you're worried that the readings you'll get when she does so will be slightly inaccurate? *Look* at him! He's inconsolable!"

The man in the white coat held his gaze.

"I implore you", pleaded Cleo. "He needs someone with him when – when it happens."

"Are you his girlfriend?" the consultant asked.

The easy answer would have been "yes", but Cleo wasn't even a girl, let alone a girlfriend.

Tom looked pitiful.

"Yes", said Cleo, and pushed his way past into the room.

He rushed towards Tom and crouched down beside him. "Are you OK?" he asked.

Tom was fearful and exhausted. "She knows I'm here", he said, quietly. "She knows I'm with her."

"And I'm with you, if you want me here." He put his arm around him.

Tom didn't reply, but he didn't pull away, either.

His mother opened her eyes and glanced at Cleo, then she smiled at Tom. "Thomas, I'm so happy for you", she said.

Then, she closed her eyes, alarms went off, and she died.

## Bhrēwā

Tom wailed in despair, a sound that rent Cleo's heart. Then, he buried his head in Cleo's shoulder and cried and cried and cried.

With that one, single action, Cleo finally understood who he was.

Nurses appeared from nowhere and tried to restart Jill's heart. The doctors raced in and took over, but to no avail. One of the nurses mouthed "How is he?" to Cleo, who nodded in return.

"Come on, Tom", he said. "The professionals have work to do."

He helped Tom to his feet and led him out to the waiting area.

"I lied to her", said Tom. "My last words to my mum were a lie. She always told me not to lie, but I lied to her, so she would die happy."

"There's no shame in that", said Cleo. "No shame at all."

"Her one wish was that I'd find someone. I told her I had. That's why she smiled when she saw you. I lied."

Cleo, who was crying himself now, held Tom's hands in his, breathed in deeply, and took the final step.

"That wasn't a lie", he replied.

## Chapter 9

## The Different Ways to Disappear

Miss Marple was still up when Cally finally arrived back home in Boroughbridge, and soon had a nice cup of tea made for him.

He put a back-channel call through to Tally and Cleo, but neither answered. He'd suspected that Tally might be otherwise occupied, but Cleo was a surprise. Miss Marple explained that he was driving a grief-stricken man back home from hospital, which Cally did accept as being just the kind of thing he *would* do, so he didn't rant about it.

"I guess it's down to us to work out what happened to David and Melanie", he said, taking a sip of his bedtime cuppa.

Miss Marple does make an excellent cup of tea.

"We can wait until the morning", she advised. "You look exhausted."

"I am, but there are lives endangered – possibly a great many of them. I can cope with a little weariness."

"Are you sure?" She wasn't certain that it wasn't just bravado.

He nodded, then sipped his tea again.

"Very well. I'm not entirely familiar with how the more other-worldly aspects of our reality work, so if you could perhaps explain what the various

## Bhrēwā

possibilities are then that would help me a great deal."

"OK", said Cally. "Well we know that David and Melanie dematerialised, because if they'd simply found a way to go invisible they would have still showed up in the scryer. As it happens, there aren't actually very many ways that people can just dematerialise, even if artefacts of Bhéwonom origin are involved."

"Could you perhaps enumerate them for me?"

Cally pondered for a moment. "Well firstly, there could be some kind of horrendous bug that has dematerialisation as a side-effect."

"Noted. Carry on."

"There's deletion, obviously, but I can't see that David and Melanie would go for that."

"I concur. They do rather *like* being alive."

"Then there's logging-off. This is what visitors from Bhéwonom do – and what we do when we go to visit Bhrēwā."

"David and Melanie have nowhere off which to log."

"Hmm", Cally was thinking. "No, but they could conceivably have been ascended somewhere else – Regjom, say, or Erwā. One of the newer worlds."

"Is that not forbidden? I distinctly recall Cleo's telling me that there is to be no more movement of mortals between worlds."

"It is forbidden, yes, as far as we know, but if they used some object left behind thousands of years ago then whether it was forbidden or not

today would be immaterial. As for why such an object would be here in the first place", he shrugged, "I don't know. The Bhéwonomese are suck-it-and-see people; it could be a part of some long-abandoned experiment."

"So if they did find such an artefact, how would they plan to return from the world to which they were removed? I would assume that they'd have done a good deal of thorough testing before entrusting their lives to what's essentially magic."

"That's a fair point. Without Bhéwonomese intervention, their trip would be one-way. Ascending involves copying and deleting, so they couldn't take anything with them; they'd need to find something at the other end to return them to Dheghōm." He screwed up his nose. "That's too unlikely for either of them to contemplate."

"What's the next method by which dematerialisation can be exhibited?"

Cally yawned. "Teleporting, but I think we can rule that out, too. David and Melanie well know that teleportation is only possible to certain predefined locations, not all of which are safe."

"Indeed", agreed Miss Marple. "Sometimes, you come back from Bhrēwā soaked."

"Yes, three of the materialisation points are underwater. I suppose the Scotts could have found some artefact that always took them to one specific place, but then they would have needed us to give them a lift home; they've never asked for one."

## Bhrēwā

"They wouldn't if that specific place was the Devil's Arrows, but if that were so then they should be here." She frowned with concern. "Wherever it is they are, if they *could* have got in touch then they would have done; they must know that the twins are terribly worried about them – as we all are – and Melanie does seem still to be in possession of her portable telephone."

"If it's not travel through space, it could be travel through time. They haven't gone backwards, because that's only possible with a world reboot, and there hasn't been one of those since before we first set foot in Dheghōm. Besides, in a reboot, *they'd* be reset along with everything else, which I can't see that either of them would endorse."

Our Muses notice when there has been a reboot, because they themselves are not reset when one occurs.

"Forward, then?"

"I think that's technically possible." He sighed. "Cleo would know for sure."

"You could try to call him again", suggested Miss Marple.

Cally tried.

There was no reply.

"How would forward time-travel work?" asked Miss Marple.

"Well it's basically what happens to you when we go to Bhrēwā. You're saved, then restored later, where you were before, as if no time had passed for you."



"You can detect when that happens, though, can't you?"

"For visitors from Bhéwonom, yes. Maybe not for people already in Dheghōm."

"If they did travel forward in time, how far forward could they have gone?"

Cally blew out a long breath. "I've no idea. It would have to be on a timer, I suppose. I don't think I've ever come across anything with that kind of functionality, but that doesn't mean there isn't such a device out there somewhere."

"They've been gone for over a day. Would they have set a timer for that long?"

"Well they could have set it for a shorter period, and then if they were still in a fix when they rematerialised, just use it again. Oh, but there are still police at Ivy Cottage; if David and Melanie *did* rematerialise, only to dematerialise immediately afterwards, they'd definitely have been noticed. We'd have heard from Mr Bright about it by now."

"So they used neither spatial nor temporal travel. What other options are there?"

"Let's see. There's absenting to Bhéwonom. Oh – not absenting, no. That would have to go through Bhrēwā, so we'd immediately perceive it. Also, the mind goes to Bhéwonom, but the body remains here – and there's only one suitable vessel in Bhéwonom anyway, they'd need two."

"Very well. So far, then, the only outstanding possibility is that David and Melanie were the victims of some frightful bug."

## Bhrēwā

"Yes, but even bugs need causes. David and Melanie wouldn't have been attempting to make something random happen to them – they'd have had a definite plan in mind."

He yawned again.

"You're tired, dear", observed Miss Marple.

"Not too tired – not yet, anyway", he replied.

"The only other options I can think of are sharding – no, not sharding, that wouldn't involve dematerialisation – "

"What exactly is it?"

"Well, it's when an additional copy of our world is created from a save. We Muses wouldn't be embodied in the copy, so we can safely say that if it *has* happened, we're in the original world, not the copy."

"And the other possibilities that you were going to mention before I so impolitely interrupted?"

Cally smiled. He really was very fond of Miss Marple.

"They're the ones Cleo suggested in his message: instancing, layering and phasing."

"I'm afraid you'll have to explain those, dear."

"An instance is a pocket universe, like the MIT one that Paul set up. They have to be premade, and there aren't any existing ones that I know of; we can check for new additions from Bhrēwā, but we'll have to wait until after we've met Marius before we do that. Otherwise, Tally won't be able to teleport Love Ellis here."

"He *could* teleport her here right now; he's simply chosen not to do so." Miss Marple did not hide her opinion that Tally had his priorities wrong.

"So that leaves layering and phasing", said Cally, hastily, in an effort reduce the level of telling-off that Tally would endure post-Marius. "Layering is when a space is overlaid by a copy of itself."

"I'm not sure I follow."

"Well the idea is that if too many people from Bhéwonom appear in the same location at the same time, a copy of that location is automatically cranked up as an overflow. Suppose that a thousand of them tried to enter this room at once – they wouldn't fit. So, what would happen is that after, say, a hundred people arrived, the hundred-and-first would appear in a fresh, empty copy of the room. Once that was full, another layer would form, and so on."

"Does our world *have* layers?"

"I've only ever seen them at the arrival points."

"Could David and Melanie have created a layer?"

"I suppose they might have found something that could do it, but the layer so created would be a copy of the reality, minus any Bhéwonomese visitors. Michayla would have been in it, still pointing her shotgun at them. Oh, just a – ", he closed his eyes and shook his head. "David and Melanie would also be in it, because they'd be copied, too – they're not from Bhéwonom. That

## Bhrēwā

would be impossible: they'd have to occupy the same space as their copies. It's not layering."

"What does phasing involve?"

"Well I left this one until last because it's the hardest to explain. A phase is where there are two versions of a space, and which one you go into when you enter that space is determined by some predetermined condition."

"Have you seen one in operation?"

"I've never come across a permanent phase, but several disagreeable people from Bhéwonom were in the occasional habit of phasing parts of Dheghōm so that they could slaughter people in them for fun. Those were temporary phases, but I would expect that if David created one then that would be temporary, too."

"How does one enter a phase?"

"Well if it's temporary, you're in it when you create it."

"And how does one exit?"

"Well therein lies a problem. The easiest way is simply to walk out of it and rejoin the unphased world, but that's not possible for ordinary people: they're stuck in the phase until it collapses. Permanent phases never collapse, but temporary ones do when their creators leave. On the plus side, it's hard to die in one – you're resurrected after a short period, good as new, like we are when we return from Bhrēwā."

"Would other people nearby be taken into such a phase as well? Could Miss Harris have been sucked into it?"

"Well we know she wasn't because I met her. Whether she counted as part of the environment and a copy of her was initialised into the phase, I don't know. It doesn't work that way for phases set up by visitors from Bhéwonom, so probably not."

He interlocked his fingers and put them next to his mouth, deep in thought.

Miss Marple allowed him to complete his analysis.

"You know", he said at length, "David and Melanie *could* have created a phase if they'd got hold of whatever some Bhéwonomese visitor used to create one. As its creators, they perhaps *would* be able to leave it."

"Then why have they not left it?"

Tally took another sip of tea. "I don't know how big the phase they created might be."

Miss Marple tut-tutted and sighed. "It's such a pity that David and Melanie's records were burnt by Miss Harris."

"We could use the scrying device to see what experiments they might have conducted. It would take a while to find when they performed them – there isn't a search facility – but if we're in luck then it might give us some idea of what they did and how we could help them." He yawned a third time.

## Bhr̥wā

"That's an excellent idea, Cally. For now though, I think it's time you got some rest."

"I'm inclined to agree", said Cally, finishing off his tea. "It'll have to wait until morning. Sorry, universe."

## Chapter 10

## Scrying and its Implications

When Tally checked his phone after breakfast, he was met with a string of WhatsApp messages, the latest of which, from Cally, read, "Get back here with Love ASAP, we need your lip-reading skills."

"Love, how long will it take you to pack?" he asked.

"No time at all. I have a duffel bag permanently ready, in case some nutter finds out where I live."

"Travel documents? Insurance?"

"Insurance? Ha!" She role-played being the immortal that she is. "I have no need for Earthly insurance – mere mortals cannot harm me!"

"Not physically, anyway." He sighed. "Cally wants me back in Yorkshire to do some lip-reading."

"When do we leave?"

"As soon as possible, as of eight o'clock."

"So in other words, now."

"That's just one other word, but yes – if you don't mind, of course."

"I'll get some England-suitable clobber."

She left for her bedroom.

"What's in the duffel bag?" he shouted after her.

"Passport, credit cards, cash, spare phone, charger, adapter plug, a change of clothes, sleepwear – "

## Bhrēwā

"So not just a bullet hole, then?"

"Oh, you noticed that?" Coming down the stairs, she saw his look of concern. "Tal, I've taken the pistol out of it."

"Only because you couldn't fly back here with it still in there."

"Correct. Where exactly are we going to teleport, by the way?"

Tally shrugged. "Boroughbridge, where I live with my sisters."

"Could you drop me off at Stanton instead?"

"I could drop you off at the Devil's Quoits, where we're meeting your father. It's a thirty-minute walk to the village from there, though."

"That's fine, I could do with the exercise. I'd like to visit my home; I haven't been there for a while."

"Your mother is away at the moment."

"I know, but home is home." She stuffed the extra clothes into her duffel bag.

Tally wasn't about to deny her request. Despite its intangibility, he still occasionally got homesick for Bhrēwā.

"OK", he typed a short message on WhatsApp, "I'll just let Cally know the plan. Shall I walk with you to your house?"

"Cally wants you in Boroughbridge an hour and a half ago."

Tally groaned and sent his message. "You're right, I'd better go. How about I pick you up from your place at ten to one."



"You're going to have to pick me up now", said Love, clutching her bag in front of her.

Tally raised a pun-sensitive eyebrow and went behind her, bending his knees and limbering-up, circus strongman-style, for effect.

"Ready?"

"Up, up and awaaaay!"

Tally lifted her off the ground, and a moment later they were at the Devil's Quoits.

"Well that wasn't quite the thrill I was hoping for", she said.

"It's chillier than Tenerife, but at least it's not raining."

"Right. Well. I guess I'll see you in two or three hours, then. You know where I live?"

"Yes, Marius and I were there yesterday, checking you weren't in. That's where I took his photo."

Love partly stepped towards him, then stopped.

It was awkward for both of them.

She gave him the same, bashful wave that he'd given her when they first met. He smiled, and returned it.

Then, he was back in Boroughbridge.

"Where have you been?" asked Cally. "Where's Love Ellis?"

"She's at her place in Oxfordshire. I'll fetch her when it's closer to Marius time." He looked around.

"Where's Cleo?"

"Cleo's indisposed. He's staying with a new-found friend whose mother has just died."

## Bhrēwā

"Where's Miss Marple?"

"At the Scotts, where we should be. Now come on, we're wasting time."

"Wait!" said Tally, "I need to change. I won't be long!"

He ran upstairs to his room.

"Something practical, please", said Cally.

"Practical yet pretty", shouted down Tally.

Two minutes later, he came down wearing teal designer dungarees over a loose cotton shirt.

"Your car-pottering gear", said Cally, somewhat lacking in enthusiasm. "Come on."

"I can always change again before we meet Marius."

Cally ushered him outside. "We'll take the Toyota."

"Where's the Merc? We could get there seven seconds faster in the Merc."

"It's in Ulverston, Tally. Haven't you read any of the messages in group chat?"

"I was busy", he replied, cagily.

"Doing what?" asked Cally, locking up the house.

"Holding everything in", replied Tally.

Cally perceived that something was troubling his sister. "Get in", he said, pointing his remote-unlock at the Yaris Cross.

When they were both belted up, he began to reverse out.

"What's bothering you?" he asked.

"Love Ellis", replied Tally. "She's amazing."

"That's a good thing, isn't it?"

"Not when you look like me."

"Oh, *that's* what this is about." On the road now, he checked the mirrors then drove off.

"How do you do it, Cally?" asked Tally. "How do you live with the frustration?"

"The same way that any man does. The world is packed full of attractive female people who are entirely unavailable – they're absolutely everywhere. You hold it in, you bear it stoically, you carry on."

"But they make it so hard! It's as if they have a bowl of strawberries, and they waft you the smell because they know you like strawberries, and they think that doing this is an act of goodwill, but what you really want is to *eat* the strawberries, not just look at them, not just smell them."

"You're guilty of plenty strawberry-wafting yourself." Cally said it matter-of-factly.

"That just makes it worse, though! I can sense the disappointment felt when the men I flirt with realise they're going to get nowhere – but they accept it, they don't resent it."

"Why are you any different? They accept their fate; you also accept your fate."

"Cally, I don't even get to *try*." Tally was close to tears. "Other men can hope. They can hope that one of those wonderful women, somewhere out there among that vast multitude, will some day come to love them."

"We can hope for that, too."

## Bhrēwā

"No we can't – there's no hope for us."

"Lesbians are in the same boat, but they seem to cope."

"It's different for us. We lack the equipment that's part of our identity."

"Well that is the heart of our predicament, I agree. Still, on the whole, I prefer having an inconveniently-configured body to not having one at all."

"So do I", said Tally. "I just wish ... I just wish... ."

Miss Marple had heard the car pull up and was waiting at the Scotts' front door.

"Good morning, Tally. Were you successful with miss Ellis?"

"Yes, she's at her home in Stanton Harcourt."

"You left her there alone?"

"She wants to see her father; she's not going to abscond."

"I was thinking more that she might be bothered by people aware of her unique abilities."

"She didn't seem worried herself – and she's very conscious of her personal safety. She's probably got a rack of shotguns stowed there or something."

Miss Marple looked him up and down. "It's nice that you got along so well with her, anyway."

Tally didn't know how she had discerned this information from his choice of outfit, but accepted that her perceptive powers were somewhat in excess of his own.

"Well if we're done with the pleasantries, shall we take a look through the scryer?" suggested Cally.

Tally and Miss Marple followed him to the workshop.

The scrying device was temporarily concealed beneath a piece of sacking. Cally recovered it and went back to the entrance, carefully avoiding any hint of a rotation.

"Now watch", he said to Tally. "This is on Saturday afternoon, I think."

Tally stood next to him and peered at the image in the scryer. "There's no-one there."

"Not yet. Watch."

He unpaused the device and the scene unfolded.

Melanie and David walked into view as if through an invisible door. Both looked pleased, but Melanie especially so.

"Definitely a layer or a phase", murmured Cally.

"Melanie's saying it worked. David's saying it looks that way. Melanie is really excited."

Cally paused it. "I can see the visuals for myself, I just need the subtitles."

He unpaused it.

"Melanie says she loves how seamless it is, the way you can see the real world from the pocket."

"Pocket?"

"That must be what they call it. David says, 'See what I mean about its being featureless?'"

## Bhrēwā

Cally followed their movements into the sitting room, where the Scotts sat down together on the sofa.

"If they said anything while they were walking, I missed it", said Tally.

"We can always go back to it if something later doesn't make sense."

"At least they're still adjacent to each other, so I can see them both at once. Ah, Melanie says, 'I don't think it's safe to tell the ... confabulationists'? Is that a word?"

"Keep watching."

"David says, 'I agree – but I can't wait to tell Miss Marple and the Muses.' Then, it's Melanie, 'We'll show them it in action when we visit on Friday.' Oh, were they coming round tomorrow?"

"They were, dear", said Miss Marple. "I did put it in your calendar for you."

"Ah. My calendar", said Tally. "Yes. My calendar."

Miss Marple tsked. "You really *should* check it more often. It's a boon."

"Can we focus on the task in hand, please?" said Cally, somewhat exasperated. He wound the view back a few seconds then restarted it.

"So, 'visit on Friday', then Melanie continues, 'What about the larpers'? What's a larper?"

"Keep watching."

"David replies, 'Well it was their find, so they deserve to know. Record me using it, then send it

to ... ' I think he says 'Delsh'. Where, what or who is Delsh?"

"I don't know about Delsh", said Cally, "but LARPer's are live-action role-players." He frowned. "Oh, hold on ... didn't David tell us something about a group of LARPer's trapped in a phase last year in the West Country somewhere? One of them posted about it on that Facebook group Melanie found, the Waking Dead."

Miss Marple put a finger to her chin. "Cleo might remember more details", she said. "He proof-read some of the documents that David retyped after Mr Bright's colleague inadvertently caused the originals to be deleted."

"When is he due back?"

"He said 12:30."

"That's cutting it a bit fine, isn't it?" said Tally. "We're meeting Marius at one. How long does it take to tell some bloke to pull himself together after his mother has died?"

"In Cleo's case, rather longer than in yours", replied Miss Marple, icily.

"I'll WhatsApp him", said Cally. "He might not be answering calls because he'd be heard, but he can't go long without looking at his messages."

"No, wait", said Tally. "I told Love I'd meet her at 12:50. That means I'll have to leave here at 12:20, 12:35 if I take a bike. That gives us five minutes at most in Bhrēwā to check if the Scotts are in an instance or a phase or both. That's not long enough."

## Bhrēwā

"If it is a phase, we should probably see if we can find it, too."

Tally made the decision. "Don't bother asking Cleo about the LARPer, just tell him that we're going to go to Bhrēwā at noon. That should give him ample time to extricate himself from whatever mess he's got himself into."

"OK", said Cally, typing in the message. "In the meantime, I think we're now in a position to be able to reconstruct the basic sequence of events that explain what we've just seen." He sent it.

"I shall provide the overview", said Miss Marple, "so you may correct me in any particulars that I have perhaps misunderstood."

Cally had no desire to give a precis himself. "Go ahead", he invited her.

"Melanie", she began, "managed to obtain the contact details of the group of game-players who had experienced a 'phase', as you call it. David went to see them – I suspect so that he could provide them with enough information about Matters Dheghōm that they wouldn't thereafter attract unnecessary further attention by blundering around in the dark. He discovered that they had an item of clothing or similar that they had recovered from one of their tormentors, so either purchased it or, more likely, was given it. Melanie did some background research regarding such items, because she's very good at that, then she despatched David to Wetherby to investigate the more promising leads. From these, he reached the



same conclusions about the nature of the fabric that Cleo did: certain objects recovered from a phrase, can be used to invoke – or perhaps reinvoke – a new one. When he returned home, he began a series of experiments on the material. These culminated in his using two halves of it to open a door to a phase. What you have just witnessed is his demonstrating its successful use to Melanie.”

“That’s about right”, said Cally. “Phases aren’t entered through portals, they just come into being, but that apart, thank you for an excellent summary, Miss Marple.”

Tally was suddenly inspired. “They must have made the two strips of cloth up into ties!”

Cally and Miss Marple exchanged resigned glances.

“Did you read *none* of what I posted in group chat?” asked Cally. “Of course it was the ties! We’ve known that since late yesterday evening!”

“I’d have read it eventually”, said Tally. “Cleo might have gone full-on Generation Z with his phone, but I haven’t.”

Cally glanced at the wall clock. “Quarter to eleven. There’s not a lot more we can do at present, until Cleo is free.”

All three of their phones pinged.

In his message, Cleo said that he’d be home by twelve, but he was driving back so couldn’t be precise.

## Bhrēwā

"Time for a cup of tea, I think", said Miss Marple. "I'll set off now, you can lock up here then take the car back." She handed Cally the house keys and departed on foot.

"If Cleo is driving back, it could be half past two before he gets here", said Tally. "Honestly, I could go faster on a pogo stick than Cleo drives."

"It depends where he's driving from. The nearest accident and emergency is in Leeds, isn't it?"

"Leeds?" Tally sighed. "Half past three, then", he muttered, glumly.

They arrived back home just after Miss Marple, largely because Tally had posed in front of and waved at every single one of MI5's surveillance cameras outside.

"The kettle's on", said Miss Marple.

"I'll get the rich teas", said Cally. "I doubt we'll have time for lunch before we meet up with Marius."

"Hob nobs for me", interjected Tally. "Please."

"Don't your bodies reset when you go to Bhrēwā?" asked Miss Marple. "You won't need to eat for hours after you've returned from your search."

Cally and Tally looked at each other.

"She's rumbled us!" said Cally, and the two raced to cupboard where the biscuits were before she could stop them.

Cally took his tea upstairs, as he wanted to try to save his paintbrushes after having left them to

soak when he'd had to leave in a hurry the previous day. Tally also went upstairs, to select a new outfit.

"You know", called Cally from his room, "we still have no idea why David and Melanie haven't returned. All they have to do is walk out of the phase and they're back among the living."

"Perhaps in Helmsley, phases aren't as empty as they are in Boroughbridge", suggested Tally.

"Should I go for the charcoal or the light grey?"

"Charcoal or light grey what? Jacket? Blouse? Skirt? Slacks?"

Cally knew that Tally hated the word 'slacks'.

It is somewhat dated – and it sounds rather unpleasant to the ear, now I think about it. Perhaps Tally has a point.

"Suit", replied Tally. "If the world is about to end, I want to look smart for it."

"I'm sure the world will appreciate that", called back Cally.

Ten minutes later, Tally had finally made his mind up and presented himself to Cally.

"What do you think?" he said, turning round so Cally could see it from all angles.

Cally didn't even glance in his direction. "Your bum looks big in it", he replied.

"You're just resentful because you wish yours was as shapely as mine", said Tally.

Cally put down his brushes and looked.

"You're going for the male vibe, then", he said. "Trying to impress Love Ellis?"

Tally bit his bottom lip. "Is it that obvious?"

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"It is to me, and I've no doubt it will be to her. She might appreciate the effort", he shrugged, "I don't know."

He returned to the arduous task of removing flecks of paint from his favourite red-sable Filbert.

"I'll wear a dress", said Tally.

He walked dejectedly back to his room.

At 11:30, Cleo sent a message saying that he was just about to leave Wetherby and hoped to be back before twelve.

Tally was downstairs, reading the BBC news on his tablet. He was wearing a smart, blue, floral dress with matching canvas shoes; Miss Marple opined that it didn't need to be quite so low-cut, but (as we all know) she can be something of a prude at times.

Cally came downstairs, also having changed. He had his hair down, which was most unlike him.

Miss Marple hurried over. "Oh, you do look smart, Cally." She adjusted his collar.

Tally had to admit that Cally did scrub up well when he chose to do so.

"I wanted to make a decent first impression on Marius", said Cally. "We've never met."

"I'm sure he'll be captivated", said Miss Marple, approvingly.

Tally returned to reading the news.

There was nothing further to report regarding the murders in Helmsley, but in the World section there was the strange tale of a young woman found wandering in the Nullarbor Wilderness Protection

Area of South Australia with no memory of who she was nor how she came to be there.

"Cally, did you take Michayla Harris to point 84?" he asked.

"Yes, Koonalda Cave."

"Her story's holding up so far."

"It won't once her face is all over social media and someone recognises her, but she can't possibly have murdered three people in North Yorkshire and got to a remote spot in South Australia within less than a day, so she's off the hook." He rolled his eyes. "My cuffs are fine, Miss Marple, and I'll be going to Bhrēwā soon anyway; honestly, anyone would think that this was my first day at school."

Miss Marple smiled primly and stepped back, holding him by the hands. "I'm so proud of you, Cally" – she looked affectionately at Tally – "I'm so proud of all of you. Seeing you all grown up, how well you've turned out."

Cally hugged her.

A tear came to Miss Marple's eye.

Cleo drove into the driveway at ten to twelve, a fact that astonished everyone – not least Cleo himself.

Miss Marple opened front the door to him.

He kissed her on the cheek, then called through to the others. "Hi, everyone, sorry for holding you up. What a day I've had!"

"You can tell us about it later", said Cally. "Right now, we have to go to Bhrēwā and look for

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instances, phases and anything else weird that might have appeared recently."

'Recently' in Bhrēwā terms could mean any time between now and 80 or 90 years ago. It's a large and very lonesome place.

"OK, just let me get changed."

"We're going to Bhrēwā, Cleo. We'll be coming back naked. What's got into you?" He shook his head.

"Did you want to sit down for this, Miss Marple?" asked Tally.

"Yes, I'll just make myself comfortable." She settled into her favourite armchair.

"Ready when you are, gentlemen", she said. She, Cally, Tally and Cleo, dematerialised.

## Chapter 11

## A Discovery of Sorts in Bhrēwā

"We don't have long, so we should split up", proposed Cally. "I'll look for phases. Cleo, you look for instances, you're better at recognising them. Tally, you look for weird stuff."

They went their separate ways, but for the moment we shall follow Tally. He spread his mind out into the vastness, into the shapeless and the shapeful, discerning, perceiving, seeking unfamiliar perturbances and uncommon rhythms.

Bhrēwā was glorious, Bhrēwā was terrible.

Bhrēwā was home.

He bumped into Cleo twice, so moved away, far, far away, to spaces where our Muses seldom venture. He searched and he sought, he felt and he fumbled, until he came across a doorway he had thought closed.

It was the doorway to Erwā.

He passed through, and found himself in Erwā's bridge. For a moment, hope brewed within him that he might reroll the dice.

Then, he found himself materialised in Erwā.

His hope dissolved. His body was his body. He didn't manifest in a new one.

How had he come here, he wondered. In Dheghōm, it was impossible to materialise without

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a thread to follow, and Miss Marple was that thread.

Had Cally and Cleo returned to Dheghōm? Perhaps that's what had materialised him in Bhrēwā.

He took in his surroundings, and ... that's when we met.

He was the thread that I needed to give me form.

"Hello", he said, in Bhéwonomese.

"Hello", I replied. It was the first word I had ever spoken aloud.

"Who are you?" he asked.

"I don't know", I replied.

He seemed to understand why. "Are you a Muse?" he asked.

"I think I am", I replied.

He looked me up and down.

"That's a male body", he observed.

I looked at it myself. "So it is", I replied.

"But you're female", he said.

"Yes, I am", I replied. Then, without precedent, I spoke words that were not in reply. "How could you tell?"

"Because I'm gorgeous and naked and standing right in front of you, but you haven't seemed to notice."

"You're a man?" I asked.

"Isn't *that* ironic", he replied.

Then, he dematerialised and I was once more back in Erwā's bridge, alone.



## Chapter 12

## A Meeting with Marius

"Oh thank goodness! We thought we'd lost you!" Cleo didn't hide his relief.

"Where were you?" asked Cally, who was also recovering from a spell of anxiety. "One moment you were there, the next you weren't."

"Erwā", answered Tally. "The doorway is still open. I went through and encountered another Muse. She's all alone."

"Erwā has a Muse?!" Cally gaped with awe.

Cleo, too, was filled with wonderment. "I didn't think that anywhere but Dheghōm had the traffic."

Dheghōm is the oldest world in Paul's stable. Erwā is relatively young. None of our Muses have been to any of the others, but they know about them from what they've overheard.

Cally and Tally began to get dressed in the clothes that they'd recently evacuated. Cleo simply scooped his up and scampered upstairs to change into something new.

"We know there are people from Dheghōm in Erwā", said Tally. "Could they have resonated?"

Cally, ever-practical, returned to the matter in hand. "We'll have to make contact with her later. Right now, we need to discuss an actual *problem*. I think I know what happened to David and Melanie, and it's not good. The phase they're in: it's the

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entirety of Dheghōm, except maybe for David's workshop."

"I saw it too", called Cleo from his room. "It's immense! No wonder it's causing issues in Bhéwonom – it's doubled the size of the world."

Dimensions are subjective in Bhrēwā, but Tally knew what he meant.

"Tell him your theory, Cleo", shouted back Cally.

Half-dressed, Cleo came onto the landing to make the conversation easier. "It's only a partial theory, and I'm not *certain* about it, but it seems to me that when David cut the phasing cloth in two in his workshop, it would have tied all future phases to that room – well, not the whole room, maybe a sphere within it or something, but it *would* have been fixed."

"So if he'd only ever tested phase-creation in his workshop", continued Cally, "he wouldn't have known any difference."

"What you're saying, then", said Tally, "is that when he and Melanie called a phase into being from Helmsley, it would have been created in his workshop?"

"Yes", confirmed Cleo. "That's how I think it ought to work. In which case..."

"...why did it seem to Michayla Harris that they disappeared?"

"I don't know", Cleo confessed. "I said it was only a partial theory."

He returned to his room to finish dressing.

"Why didn't he test it anywhere else?" asked Tally, taking out his make-up bag. "I would have done."

"No you wouldn't", said Cally. "You're too impetuous. My guess is that wearing the ties when they went to Ivy Cottage was the test."

"Helmsley's twenty miles from Boroughbridge as the crow flies", said Tally, putting on some light foundation. "That would ... oh. Oh no. Oh shit – "

"Tally!" admonished Miss Marple

"Sorry, Miss Marple, I mean ... well, the thing is, it's inside-out. The phase is inside-out."

"Inside-out like a glove or a sock?"

"Yes. Imagine a bag with 'this side phases' written on the inside. Close the bag, you get a phase on the inside. Turn the bag inside-out, and now when you close it, 'this side phases' is written on the outside. David and Melanie phased the whole of Dheghōm except David's workshop. They must have made the ties back-to-front or something."

"It would take them a day to walk here even if they knew where here was in a featureless terrain", said Cally. "Is there any way we can collapse the phase from the outside?" He shouted, "Cleo – "

"I heard", called Cleo. "Probably not,, but even if it were then David and Melanie would collapse with it. We might be able to find out where they were in the phase from the outside, I don't know, I've never seen one this big before, but I didn't get a proper look at it."

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"Can we go inside and teleport them out?"

Cleo emerged from his room. "We'd need to be cautious, we don't know exactly what's in there."

Tally looked at him over the top of his compact mirror. "If I were lost like they are, I'd touch the ties together and see if that collapsed the phase, like a toggle. What would have happened if they'd done that?"

"I don't know *everything*, Tally", said Cleo, "there aren't books on this kind of thing. At best, touching the cloths would do nothing. At worst, it would create a phase within the phase, maybe an avalanche of them as it tried to copy itself, I really don't know; please stop asking when I *don't know*."

"If it's recursing, it would trap us, too", noted Cally.

"We need to go back to Bhrēwā and see if we can detect where David and Melanie are", said Tally, replacing his make-up kit in his bag. "If they're not in phased-Helmsley, at least that means they're able to move."

"That's what we were planning to do, until we noticed you were missing and had to bail out to Dheghōm."

"I've just wasted my time putting on my make-up, haven't I?"

For reasons that shall soon become apparent, perhaps now would be a good time for me to explain the origins of our Muses.

As you know, Dheghōm is in all respects a game played by the people of Bhéwonom. What you may

not know, but perchance have deduced, is that Bhrēwā is the interface – or bridge – between the two worlds. All passage from Bhéwonom to Dheghōm and back goes through it. It is in Bhrēwā where the wishes of visitors are transformed into actions for their bodies. It is in Bhrēwā where languages spoken by visitors are transformed into languages understood by natives. It is in Bhrēwā where all information from Dheghōm is filtered, assembled and passed back for real-time consumption by the players of Bhéwonom.

It is here that Cally, Tally and Cleo were formed.

It is in Erwā's bridge that I was formed.

Seven miles southwest of Boroughbridge is the market town of Knaresborough. The first tourist attraction in England to charge an entrance fee is there: a dropping well, or petrifying well as these are sometimes known, near Mother Shipton's Cave. Water highly rich in minerals tumbles over a low cliff-edge to create a small cascade, in which pretty stalactites and stalagmites form naturally. Objects hung in the falling water will, over time, absorb or be coated by the minerals, gradually becoming petrified. Items such as shoes, mugs, handbags and (especially) teddy bears ornament it.

The passing of information from Dheghōm to Bhéwonom can be likened to a flow of mineral-rich water. Left uninterrupted, it can form metaphorical stalactites where it leaves Dheghōm and stalagmites where it arrives in Bhéwonom. However, as with the dropping well near Mother

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Shipton's Cave, these structures cannot take the shape of teddy bears unless there are teddies in the flow.

On rare occasions, a person from Dheghōm is absented to Bhéwonom, which is to say that they are given control of a robot body in that world. They pass through Bhrēwā in the opposite direction to that of visitors from Bhéwonom. This acts as the equivalent of inserting a teddy bear in a dropping well.

As more and more people from Bhéwonom visit Dheghōm, so more and more information from Dheghōm passes to Bhéwonom. Gradually, the teddy bear accretes its own identity. The result is not a copy of the person who was absented, but its general form – a human being – is the same. In truth, the form emerges from not one, but every person who has ever been seen by or heard by, or has otherwise impinged on the senses of, a visitor from Bhéwonom.

At some point, the teddy bear – the Muse – gains the same kind of self-awareness as its contributors. It knows itself to be, and it knows it should be a person, but it also knows that it isn't yet a person, any more than a petrified teddy bear is a teddy bear. It has the mind, but not the body.

On the 2<sup>nd</sup> of June, 2024, the game designer Eugene Nethercott was absented to Bhéwonom. On the 5<sup>th</sup> of September, 2020, the Reverend Dominic Hughes was absented. The metaphorical teddies that these incidents placed in Bhrēwā have

yet to petrify, but they will, in time, if visitors from Bhéwonom ever return to Dheghōm in sufficient numbers.

On the 27<sup>th</sup> September, 2748 BC, a man – I don't know his name – was absented from Dheghōm to Bhéwonom. Cleo was the result. Prior to that – I don't know the dates – two other people had been absented: these resulted first in Cally, then in Tally.

I can't say when I self-actualised in Erwā's bridge, nor how long it took. I imagine that someone from Erwā must in the past have been absented to Bhéwonom, but Erwā's society is a primitive one and those few records that predate me are but daubs and carvings on the walls of undiscovered caves. I'm probably younger than Cleo, but who can tell? Time isn't as meaningful in bridges as it is in the places that they bridge.

So, allow me to elucidate why I chose to tell you this now.

When we have bodies in Dheghōm or Erwā, it seems to us that our minds are, too – but they are not. They remain running on the hardware of our respective bridges. This is why, when a world is reset, we are spared.

It is also why, when something happens in our bridge, we are aware of it regardless. When many things happen, they become mere noise that we can ignore, much in the same way that you, at present, are ignoring how your clothes feel against your skin. However, when there's no noise in

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Bhrēwā, even the slightest drop of a pin will attract our Muses' attention.

As for why I chose now to explain this, well the very next line provides your answer.

"Did you feel that?" asked Cleo.

"Something's come through", said Tally.

Cally checked his watch. "12:15. Marius isn't due for another 45 minutes."

"It wasn't a person", said Cleo. "It wasn't big enough to be a person. It must be inanimate."

At this juncture, you need to be aware that although visitors from Bhéwonom can only appear at a fixed number of entry points, this is not the case for ordinary, unthinking objects. They can be materialised anywhere. Sarah puts letters in David's safe, for example.

"Shit!" exclaimed Tally. "Marius has sent a message to Love!"

"Language!" berated Miss Marple, but Tally only caught the first syllable: he immediately teleported to the Devil's Quoits in Oxfordshire and set off running at pace in the direction of the Ellis home in Stanton Harcourt.

"Should we go too?" asked Cleo.

"It might seem menacing if three of us showed up."

"What do you make of what he said about Erwā?"

"I'm wondering just how many other worlds have Muses. If Erwā has one, what about Tersā?"



What about Agros? They're almost as old as Dheghōm."

"We should invite the Muse from Erwā's bridge to our place, get to know her."

"Ah", said Miss Marple. "You noticed that Tally said she was a she. That will make a nice change."

"What I don't understand is how Tally managed to manifest in Erwā without a link to follow."

Cleo had an idea, but didn't voice it. He liked Miss Marple a great deal, and didn't want her to learn that she might be replaceable.

Twenty minutes later, when Tally arrived at the idyllic, well-kept thatched cottage with half-timbered walls that was the childhood home of Love Ellis, he was completely out of breath and had a terrible stitch in his side.

He knocked on the door.

Love answered. "Tal!", she said, both pleased and surprised to see him. "You're early."

Panting, Tally asked if he could come in.

Love directed him to a quaint little sitting room, with a small-paned window and a ceiling of exposed oak beams. "I'll bring you some water", she said.

"Thanks", said Tally, wondering if he was ever going to get his breath back.

He heard a tap running. "You can probably guess why I ran all the way here", he called.

"You found out my father had sent a letter?" She returned with a glass tumbler and held it out to him.

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"Yes, I – oh thank you." He took the glass and glugged down some water. "Ooh, that's better. Phew!"

He nursed it in his hands as Love sat down in the chair opposite.

"I was worried he might have threatened you." He was starting to recover now.

"No, nothing of the sort. He simply told me what was about to happen and gave me some options."

Tally shook his head, smiling resignedly. "You're making me ask again. Very well: 'What options, Love?' "

Love laughed. "It's for dramatic effect!" She leaned forward, conspiratorially. "OK, so he wrote that this world is about to be rebooted. He's given me a choice: stay here, and relive the last nearly two years of my life oblivious to having already lived them, or go somewhere else and retain the knowledge."

"I thought there was to be no more movement of mortals between Dheghōm and other worlds."

"I'm not a mortal: I'm a demihero."

That's fair enough: she is the daughter of a hero and a mortal, after all.

"Well in that case, why wouldn't you go somewhere else while Dheghōm is being rebooted, then return here once it's completed?"

"Because the copying process would make me mortal. Therefore, the rule prohibiting mortal

transfers would apply. The Bhéwonomese are very strict about such things."

"Would you mind being mortal?"

"Not at all. People might stop trying to kill me if I were mortal." She chuckled. "That's nicely counter-intuitive!"

"Do you know which other world you'd be moved to?"

"My choice, but I know nothing about any of them."

"So what's your thinking?"

"I was going to ask you your opinion. If I stay, I'll be a poet again, probably for the rest of my life."

"I wouldn't be reset. I could seek you out."

"We both know that that wouldn't work. We had to become ourselves together."

Tally sighed. "Sorry, it was just the hope talking. So you're leaning towards leaving?"

"I'm considering it. I'd miss my mum, but other than her, well, the only other person here I really care about is you."

Tally felt the same, plaintive wrench inside that he'd experienced when he read Love's final poem.

"Would you get a new material form?" He knew that Marjie Laleek had been given one when she moved to Erwā.

"Yes, with a different, normal-looking number. I'd be younger and look nothing like I do here, but I would guaranteed still be female, I made certain of that." She looked at her hands and turned them over. "Ultimately, I have to choose between

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keeping my body or keeping my mind. That's sure to amuse philosophers."

Tally gazed at her, then gazed through her, then gazed through the world.

"If you do leave, choose Erwā", he said. "I may be able to visit you there. Then, you wouldn't be totally friendless, and I could pass verbal messages between you and your mother."

His phone rang.

He answered it, but then put it away. It was Cally coming in on the backchannel.

"Tally, is Love OK?"

"Yes, she's fine". He leaned towards her. "Sorry, it's Cally on the an encrypted channel, in case your father's got the place bugged somehow."

"Have you found out what was in the letter?"

"I have, but I feel kind of awkward talking to you about it behind her back."

"Let's meet at point 293, we can discuss it there while we wait for Marius – he's still coming, isn't he?"

Tally asked Love. "Is your father still coming?"

She nodded.

"Yes, he's still coming."

"Right, we'll see you both there shortly. I'll bring Miss Marple, too."

He hung up.

"Sorry about that said Tally", taking a tissue from his bag to wipe away some perspiration. "He suggests we meet up at the Devil's Quoits and discuss what your father told you."

Love took the glass off him. "You need to look in a mirror first. Your make-up is all over the place."

"Argh, I wasn't expecting to have to run for twenty minutes when I put it on; how bad is it?"

Love pointed at a looking-glass hanging next to a bookcase. "Judge for yourself."

Tally did. "Oh my word, I'll have to make emergency repairs." He took out his make-up bag.

Love went to the hallway and collected her duffel bag. "Did you tell Cally what my father had written?"

"No", said Tally, hastily wiping aside some smudged mascara. "I said it was for you to decide whether you wanted to do that. Damn, this stuff is supposed to be waterproof, but it's no such thing."

Love came up behind him, and to his complete surprise began to brush his hair.

His heart pounded, but he knew she was only trying to save him time.

He reapplied the eyeliner on his right eye, dabbed on some foundation where it was *really* in trouble, and checked his lipstick.

"That'll have to do", he said, "good job with the hair, thanks."

"You're welcome", said Love.

"Ready?"

She put down the hair brush on a side table.

She nodded.

Tally lifted her up, and a moment later they joined Cally, Cleo and Miss Marple at the Devil's Quoits.

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"It's not a popular tourist destination, then", observed Miss Marple. She smiled pleasantly at Love. "Hello, I'm Jane Marple. You must be Love. Tally has told me all about you."

Love shook her hand. "He hasn't, or you wouldn't be so smiling."

Miss Marple smiled some more.

"Cally", said Cally, shaking Love's hand in turn.

"Cleo", said Cleo, doing likewise. "Pleased to meet you."

"We only have fifteen minutes before Marius appears", said Cally. "Tally says you can shed some light on what he's likely to tell us."

"He's going to tell you that this fine little world, Dheghōm, will shortly be rebooted and it'll be the 2<sup>nd</sup> of October, 2023, all over again."

"We have to stop him, then", stated Cally.

"Why?" asked Tally.

"Because people have been born since then who won't be born the second time round."

"But other people will be born who weren't born the first time round. It's swings and –".

He froze, then his jaw suddenly dropped as an astonishing realisation hit him.

"Cally! Cally! Cleo! Cleo! Don't you see? If there's a reboot, we get to roll the dice again! We didn't come to Dheghōm until weeks *after* the reboot. We'll get new bodies! There's a fifty-fifty chance they could be *male* bodies!"

Cally was staggered. "Wow, Tally – that's right! We could be who we really *are* – and even if we're not, maybe next time round *I'll* be the prettiest."

That last remark was a joke. Cally has no interest in being the prettiest of our Muses.

"We'll have a far smoother time of it, too. We won't have to relearn everything we've already learned. Even better, a reboot would bring David and Melanie back. Two birds, one stone! We can bring them up to speed on what they found out in the months they'll be repeating – Cleo proof-read everything – ", he glanced at Cleo, " – and."

He stopped. Cleo was red-faced and suppressing tears.

"Cleo?" asked Tally, concerned.

"It makes sense", said Cleo. "It's definitely worth a try. We could all get male bodies and be happy. It's exciting."

"You don't look excited to me", said Cally. "What's wrong."

"Nothing's wrong, I think we should do it. I'm pleased, that's all."

"Tell us what's wrong, Cleo. You're all but crying – and *don't* pretend it's through sheer joy."

Cleo looked to Miss Marple in panic. The elderly lady said nothing, but she nodded in a kindly way, as if she knew.

Cleo gave in and sobbed, softly. "I've fallen in love", he mumbled.

"Oh", said Tally, somewhat taken aback. "With whom?"

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"His name is Tom Metcalfe, and he's the sweetest man... ."

Cally and Tally looked to each other.

"We can't allow a reboot", said Tally. The terrible disappointment scorched on his face was plain for all to see – but so was the fact that he meant every word he'd said.

"No", said Cleo, taking off his glasses so he could wipe his eyes. "You can't give up the chance to reroll. I know how awful it is for you, I –"

"Cleo, you're so cute!" said Tally. "Tom's a lucky man."

"But you're *unlucky* men", said Cleo. "I can't – I won't – stand in your way. I'll still be in love after the reboot."

"You will, but *he* won't. You know this! Why are you being so obstructive?"

"You're, you're arguing against your own future happiness."

"So are you", retorted Tally. "Only, mine's the better argument."

"Cleo", said Cally. "We can't let you lose what you've wanted for an eternity – what we've *all* wanted for an eternity. We blocked access to Dheghōm to speed the world up; we sped it up so that Paul would send in a probe; we wanted a probe so we could use it to enter Dheghōm; we wanted to enter it because we wanted bodies. Do you remember *why* we wanted bodies?"

Of course Cleo remembered. All our Muses knew exactly what their goal had been.



"It was to fall in love", wept Cleo, quietly.

Tally put his arm around him. "We're happy for you Cleo. *Happy* for you! Hey, I'll get to be a bridesmaid!"

Cleo smiled a weak smile. "But *your* happiness is – "

Love lost patience. "For fuck's sake, Cleo, stop being a martyr and listen to them!"

"I'm inclined to agree", added Miss Marple, "absent the profanity."

"Right", said Tally, taking out his make-up bag. "Let's get you sorted before Marius arrives. I thought *I* looked a mess... ."

He glanced over Cleo's shoulder at Love.

Love pointed at her heart, then pointed at him.

Tally closed his eyes for a moment, bottled up his feelings, and got to work on Cleo.

"I probably shouldn't stay", said Miss Marple. "If Marius sees me, he might discern how you gain egress to this world."

"I'll take you back", said Cally.

He picked her up, teleported back to Boroughbridge, and deposited her in a chair.

"Stay seated for the next few minutes", he ordered. "We may have to go to Bhrēwā at short notice."

"Understood!" she replied, and saluted.

Cally kissed her on the cheek and returned to point 293,

At one o'clock, Marius materialised.

"Love!" he said, upon seeing his daughter.

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"Hi, Marius", she replied.

Love calls him by his first name when she talks to him directly.

He gave her a hug, which she didn't shy away from.

He looked at the others. "All three Muses? I do feel honoured."

"So Paul is planning to reboot Dheghōm", said Cally.

"As soon as I leave here, yes."

"He mustn't do that."

"I'm afraid he must. The server is setting off all manner of warning lights and alarms. Switching it off and on again is the obvious solution."

"My sister has fallen in love", said Tally, waving a hand toward Cleo.

"Well, having once done that same thing myself, I can't really criticise her", said Marius. "The central fact of the matter is, however, that if Paul doesn't reboot Dheghōm now, it will only be a day or two before it crashes and will have to be rebooted less gracefully. It's drawing more and more power by the second, and neither he nor his programmers know what's causing it."

"We do", said Cally. "It's a phase issue."

"How long do you suppose it would take Paul to correct it?"

Cally glanced at Cleo. Knowing what they knew about Paul, definitely longer than a day or two.

"I see", said Marius.

"We can try to fix it for you."

"And how long will that take you?"

"How long can you give us?"

Marius looked Cally in the eye, judging his character.

"I'd like to discuss my daughter's plans with her. Paul gave me ten minutes, but shall we say fifteen? You were kind enough to bring her to me before I told you what the problem was; that degree of trust deserves to be rewarded."

"She came of her own accord", said Tally. "We merely provided the –"

"Tal, you've got fifteen fucking minutes to save Cleo's life from ruination! Get going!"

None of our Muses took issue with Love.

They disappeared, and their empty clothes tumbled to the ground.

## Chapter 13

### Fifteen Minutes from Ruination

"Where is it?" Tally wanted to know.

"This way", replied Cally.

"Has it grown?" asked Cleo. "It seems bigger than I remember."

"Hard to tell. Do you see the entrance?"

Tally soared in all directions to get a fix on the centre. "It's enclosed, but it's at the origin. I'll act as marker."

"I think I sense the Scotts", offered Cleo. "There, in the sixth and eighth. The pattern fluctuates ever so slightly."

"Where does that correspond to in Dheghōm? Have they moved?"

"I don't know, Cally."

"Can you mark it?"

"Not so you'd see it from the inside, no. It isn't anchored."

"I can freely teleport when inside, though?"

"Phases aren't material, so if you enter from here, yes."

"Then I'm going in."

Cleo faltered. "But – but if the phase is cascading, you'll never come out."

"You can summon me."

"Not if you're underneath an exponentially rising ocean of self-duplicating phases."

"You know how to use Miss Marple as a thread."

"Yes, but I've never done so. Neither has – "

"If I'm not out in ten minutes, take us all to Dheghōm."

"That might not work either. What if you rise faster than you can fall?"

"So I may be trapped in there forever?"

"I don't know. Yes. It depends. I don't know."

"And if there's a reboot while I'm inside?"

"You would cease to exist." He hesitated. "The Scotts would be OK, I think; they entered through Dheghōm."

"The phase will collapse when the Scotts leave? I don't have to leave first?"

"I – I think so. You'd be returned to where you came from, like them."

Cally mused.

"Would you be stuck in Bhrēwā if anything happened to me?"

"No."

"If I enter the phase, will you be dragged in too?"

"No."

Cally mused some more.

"Then I'm going in."

Cally is courageous. Cally would risk his life for Cleo's future happiness.

Cally was always going to go in.

It was a stark place.

There was land – rocks and soil – but no vegetation grew upon it, nor was there any living

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creature that he could see. It had topography, with hills and valleys, and there were streams and rivers, but there were no buildings, no fences, no paths. The sun shone brightly in a cloudless sky.

Somewhere in this desolate and forbidding landscape were David and Melanie Scott.

He teleported to where Tally held the space. He could see David's workshop beyond, in Dheghōm.

He could walk through, but that would put him in Dheghōm and take Tally and Cleo with him.

That's if the whole phase wasn't recursing.

"Which direction to the Scotts?" he asked.

Neither Tally nor Cleo could read him.

He had little time.

Would David and Melanie have moved far, or would they have stayed close to where they opened the phase, hoping to be rescued?

Probably the latter.

There was nothing to eat in this barren proto-world, but there was water. David and Melanie would need to drink. He thought back to when he drove past Ivy Cottage: a small brook – or beck, in the local dialect – burbled nearby. If its course wasn't kindled by human hand, it would be there in the phase.

His best – perhaps only – hope was that they'd be waiting at what in Dheghōm was the site of Ivy Cottage.

If only he knew exactly where that was from here.

He could use David's workshop to get his bearings. It was oriented roughly east-northeast to west-southwest. Helmsley was pretty well northeast. The sun was therefore high in the south-southwest sky; that would allow him to keep track of what direction he was facing when he moved.

He didn't have time for this. He teleported what he figured was maybe thirty kilometres northeast, and took in what he saw.

It wasn't enough. He teleported around in a spiral pattern to take in more.

There were streams, feeding a river.

Was that the Rye? Helmsley was on the Rye.

He followed it, teleporting in great strides.

This was taking too long.

He chanced his instincts and cut blind across country.

There was a river here, with streams joining from the north.

Had he overshot?

Hard to tell. Newly formed rivers don't meander from sediment deposits.

He teleported back a couple of hundred metres or so.

Cleo would bring him out after ten minutes. How long did he have left?

He began another spiral search, fifty metre jumps.

Five jumps, ten, fifteen, twenty ... no luck.

Twenty-five, thirty, thirty-five –

## Bhrēwā

He saw them! Sitting by the side of a stream.

He teleported over. They'd made a large X on the ground with loose rocks. That was darling of them.

"David! Melanie! We have like two minutes to get you out!"

"Cally!" said David. "Are we glad to – "

"Two minutes! No chat! I can't carry both of you: Melanie first."

Melanie was the closer.

Melanie was the lighter.

Cally picked her up by the waist and dropped her off where Tally marked the spot.

"Walk through – run through!"

He shot back to David.

He tried to lift him, but struggled.

"Damn it, damn it!"

David stepped onto a rock.

Cally got a grip around the top of his thighs, then fell backwards so that David was in the air.

He teleported to the workshop, completing his tumble to the ground upon arrival.

"Go through! Now!"

David scrambled to his feet and rapidly obeyed.

Cally didn't move. He'd broken a rib when David had fallen on him, but that would be fixed next materialisation.

He waited.

Moments later, the phase was gone and he found himself in Bhrēwā.



Cleo was relieved. "That was close! If I hadn't felt Melanie pass through, I'd have taken you to Dheghōm fifteen seconds ago."

Cally didn't answer: he sent down Miss Marple and dropped to Dheghōm, taking the others with him, then teleported to the Devil's Quoits. Tally and Cleo followed.

Marius looked mildly amused to see three naked women materialise in front of him.

"It's done", said Cally, hurriedly putting on his knickers.

"How?" asked Marius.

"With some difficulty."

Marius studied him. "I've never seen anyone exit like you exited. I've never seen anyone enter like you entered. You are not ordinary people."

"We are *precisely* ordinary people", said Tally.

"I won a day's reprieve from this world's designer by telling him that I had met a Muse, and that were he to reboot it then all records of her presence might be lost."

Cally gave a short laugh. "I hope he wasn't too disappointed when he looked at the logs."

"I'd say more panicked than disappointed."

"Had the news not reached him that we avoid accession numbers?" asked Cleo.

"It hadn't reached me, either. Do you mind if I..?" He gestured in the air and produced a small vial containing a liquid.

"Not at all", said Cally.

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Marius drank the potion and looked above their heads.

He checked it was working by looking above his daughter's; then, he caused the vial to disappear.

"You must realise that with skills such as yours, you could live exceptional lives", he said. "What's your secret?"

"Love hasn't told you, so neither shall we", replied Tally. He was fully dressed now. Frocks for the win!

Marius stared into space for a moment, as if distracted, then refocused. "Congratulations. It seems that your efforts have succeeded. All parameters have returned to normal. Paul may yet be hankering for a reboot, but that's now impermissible."

"Well that's useful to know", said Cally, drily.

"For related reasons, I'll shortly have to exit. Before I do, however, I must know: were you responsible for the problem that you have just corrected?"

"No", said Cally. "We made this world what it is, and we're rather partial to it. We don't seek to endanger its existence."

"The problem was caused by a phasing-sheet", added Cleo, "left behind by a defeated hero and claimed as legitimate spoils of war by a mortal."

"Really?" He thought for a moment. "So, to collapse the phase, you'd need to do it from the inside. How would you access the interior of a phase you didn't open?"

"Dad", said Love, "they're not going to tell you, so you're wasting your time asking."

"Never mind; from what I'm being told, it would seem that my sojourn here must end now anyway. I bid you all farewell."

He hugged Love, murmured a passing few words in her ear, then was gone.

Love was a little upset, which surprised her.

"How about that? I do know my father."

## Chapter 14

### An Improbable Exchange

Following an hour-long taxi ride from Abris Romaní, Tally and Love had arrived at Terminal 1, Barcelona airport. They were now having a quick bite to eat at Burger King before Love went through security for her flight to Tenerife.

"We're going to have to have that conversation we've been putting off", said Tally.

"Can't we put it off some more?" asked Love, sounding hopeful.

She knew they couldn't. She was trying to make it easier for Tally to ask the question.

He put their worries into words. "Are we ever going to see each other again?"

"Well, you're going to live forever, and it's possible that so might I. Probabilistically, the odds are high."

"Oh, Love." He half-smiled. "We can't put this off. We have to decide." He reached to place his hand on hers, but hesitated, then pulled back.

"Annnd that's our problem right there", she said, nodding at his fingers.

"It would have hurt you. It would have hurt me. I'm – I'm effectively castrated. It doesn't feel right – it isn't right – to offer what I can't deliver. I want to be with you", he looked away, "heaven knows how much I want to be with you. It's just ... ". He

clamped his lips together, trying to keep hold of his emotions. "Damn it, why did the random-number generator give me *this* kind of body?"

Love toyed with her cola cup. "When Marius asked me whether I wanted to stay or to move for the reboot, I told him I didn't know. He asked me if I'd be happy moving. I said no. He asked me if I'd be happy staying. I said no." She shook her head, sorrowfully. "This is what we've done to each other, Tal."

"What did you eventually decide?"

"I didn't, he did: do both. A new copy of me as I am begins afresh somewhere else; an old copy of me as I was relives two years here."

"That's ... a terrible solution!"

"It's my own fault: I told him I was in two minds about what to do, and that gave him the idea."

"It's still a terrible solution."

His eyes darted as he tried to assess the implications. He knew he didn't like the idea of two Loves, but he didn't know *why* he didn't like it.

Finally, the answer hit him. "It changes who you are."

"Perhaps that's for the best."

Tally battled to understand in the wake of what his emotions were telling him.

She sensed his struggle, and put her hand on his. "See? I can do it."

"You're a woman. It means something different."

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She withdrew it. "We're not to be, Tal, you and I. It's not that I find your body gross or abhorrent, it's just, well it doesn't turn me on. People think that all modern middle-class female poets must be gay. People think that all modern female mathematicians of any class must be gay." She looked at him with her deep-blue eyes. "I can't help it, Tal, but I'm not. I could never be intimate with you. The female form just doesn't do it for me. Making love to a woman would be like making love to, I don't know, a stuffed toy. I don't think I could live with that. I don't think I could endure years of love without acts of love."

Tally felt ... was it grief?

"I understand – I really, truly do. I couldn't ever sleep with a man, it's – I could never accept it. I simply *couldn't*, and that's just how I'm wired up. Even thinking about it ... eww!" He tried a feeble smile. "Don't feel guilty, Love. Don't feel guilty at all."

"This is it, then?" She looked down at her burger. It was only half-eaten.

"Oh, Love, if things could have been different..."

"If they hadn't been the way they were, Tal, we'd never have found ourselves."

"Or each other."

She stood up. "I'd better go before I make a fool of myself." She dabbed an eye with an unused paper napkin.

"I don't care if I do", said Tally, also rising. "Men aren't allowed to cry, but I look ...". He didn't finish the sentence.

He took a tissue from his bag in readiness for the tears he knew were coming.

"Well, bye, Tal", said Love.

She held out her hand.

Tally shook it. "I'll never forget you, you know that. Never."

Love was about to say something, but stopped herself. She faltered, then spontaneously kissed him on the cheek.

Then, she picked up her travel bag and hurried towards the security queue.

Tally gave her a final wave that she didn't see.

Unable to look as her light left his life, he turned away and made his way to the pharmacy.

He was going to need more tissues.

That night, back in Boroughbridge, he sat in his room and let his imagination roam free with purpose.

Never underestimate the creativity of a man in love.

Well of course he was in love! You probably realised that before he himself did!

'To think' is a verb. It means to undertake mental activity. A thinker thinks thoughts.

'Think' is also a noun. "I'm having a think" means that I'm engaged in the act of thinking.

'To muse' is a verb. It means to be absorbed in mental activity. A musers muses musings.

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'Muse' is also a verb. "I'm having a muse" means that I'm engaged in the ongoing act of musing.

We are Muses, not Musings or Musers. We aren't that which is mused; we aren't that which muses: we are the ongoing act of musing.

You *think*, therefore you are.

We *are*, therefore we muse.

Tally mused.

When he awoke the next morning, he came downstairs in his dressing gown. He was the last one up, by at least half an hour.

"Morning, all", he said.

"It isn't like you not to dress for breakfast", observed Miss Marple. "Did you have trouble sleeping?"

We Muses don't sleep in our bridges, so sometimes we don't quite get it right in material form.

"No, I didn't bother putting any clothes on because we're going to Bhrēwā."

"Why?" asked Cally.

You'll have noticed by now that Cally is a very forthright person.

"I'm going on to Erwā. I want to discuss something with its Muse."

"We'll join you", said Cally. "We haven't met her yet."

"No, I need to speak to her alone."

Cally and Cleo exchanged cautious glances.

"Why?" asked Cally.



"Because if you were there, you'd find all kinds of excellent, sensible reasons for us not to do what I'm going to put to her."

"Well assume those reasons apply anyway", said Cally.

"Are you sure about this, Tally?" asked Miss Marple. "You're giving the clear impression that you're planning something dangerous."

"Not for her. Not for me either, if she says no."

"At least let me finish my muesli first", said Cleo.

Tally poured a mug of lukewarm tea from the pot and waited.

Cleo didn't have to finish his muesli. There's no hunger in Bhrēwā, and rematerialisation in Dheghōm includes a full refuel. He did like his breakfast, though, so Tally indulged him.

"I wonder if there's way I can stand such that that when my clothes fall to the ground they form a neatly folded pile", said Cally.

Tally smiled, but the rest of his face was serious. "Is everyone ready?"

"I'll just sit down", said Miss Marple, heading into the lounge.

"Ready", she called, a few seconds later.

With that, our Muses were back in Bhrēwā

"Don't follow me, please."

"We won't."

"We'll have to meet her eventually. You can't hide her away.."

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"I've no intention of hiding her away, Cally. I may even bring her back with me."

"Miss Marple can name her."

"Not yet."

"While we're waiting, I'll see if the phase caused any damage."

"Good idea, Cleo. I'll help."

Tally was pleased that his request was being respected. "I won't be long."

He came to Erwā's bridge.

I used him as a thread to embody us both in Erwā.

He proposed an exchange, and wondered if I would be amenable to it.

I was very, very amenable to it.

"You should come and meet my sisters in Dheghōm's bridge", he said. "We call it Bhrēwā."

We dematerialised and I followed him through a door I'd never seen before, into a space of ancient weaves and strange fancies.

"Cally, Cleo. I'd like to introduce our new neighbour."

They came.

"I'm Cally."

"I'm Cleo."

"I have no name, but Tally said I'll have one soon."

"Said?" Cally picked up on the word. "You spoke in Erwā?"

"Tally, we didn't materialise in Dheghōm when you materialised there", remarked Cleo. "We stayed here."

"I know. I materialised in Erwā the other time I was there. I even had material form already when you exited Bhrēwā and rematerialised me with you in Dheghōm. That's why what I propose might work. Now, I need you to do exactly as I instruct. No questions, no argument, no discussion. Do you promise?"

"No. That would be both foolish and reckless of us."

"I need you to promise, Cally."

"You can need all you want, Tally. I'm not going to let you put yourself at risk."

"Faint heart never won fair lady."

Cleo understood those words. "What are you planning?" he asked.

Tally's explanation was somewhat circumspect, so I'll give you the straight-up version.

**Step 1:** Cleo, Tally and I go to Erwā's bridge.

**Step 2:** I use Tally as a thread to take us both to Erwā. Because Tally is being used as a thread, Cally and Cleo don't go with him.

**Step 3:** Cally summons Tally to Bhrēwā. This causes me to return to Erwā's bridge because Tally was my thread. Tally's body remains in Erwā.

Cleo had a question at this point.

"How do you know your body will remain in Erwā?"

"I don't, but I believe it will."

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"It could die with no-one in it. It could cease to exist when you left it. If either of those things happens, you might be unable to take material form ever again."

"I could get to reroll."

"Both Dheghōm and Erwā record you as having rolled. You won't be able to reroll."

Cally had a question. "If Tally can't visit Dheghōm, will that mean we can't either? We all materialise together."

Cleo pondered for a moment. "No, we should be OK. That's a thread-following thing."

**Step 4:** If Tally's body doesn't remain in Erwā, abort.

**Step 5:** I go to Bhrēwā.

**Step 6:** I use Cally as a thread to go to Dheghōm. Because Cally is being used as a thread, Tally and Cleo don't go with him.

**Step 7:** Cleo summons me to Erwā's bridge. This causes Cally to return to Bhrēwā because he was my thread. My body remains in Dheghōm.

**Step 8:** I use Cleo as a thread to enter Erwā, occupying Tally's disconnected body.

Cleo had another point to raise. "How do you know that's even possible?"

"Why wouldn't it be?" Taly was insouciant. "The only reason that we can't swap bodies is because we all appear at the same time."

"We don't know that that's the *only* reason. She might be unable to occupy your disconnected body."

Bodies could be bespoke, we don't know.

Attempting to inhabit it might break it."

"She could always reoccupy her own body."

"Yes, but *your* body could be gone!"

Cally chipped in. "What's more, the very action of occupying your disconnected body might destroy *her* disconnected body."

"She'd still be guaranteed a body at the end of it."

"You'd still be bodiless forever."

**Step 9:** If one of the disconnected bodies becomes unusable, abort.

**Step 10:** Tally uses Miss Marple as a thread to enter Dheghōm, occupying my disconnected body. Cally and Cleo go with him.

**Step 11:** I return to Erwā's bridge.

**Step 12:** Cally, Tally and Cleo return to Bhrēwā.

**Step 13:** I go to Bhrēwā.

**Step 14:** I use Cleo as a thread to go to Dheghōm. Because Cleo is being used as a thread, Cally and Tally don't go with him.

**Step 15:** Cally uses Miss Marple as a thread to enter Dheghōm. Tally goes with him. If the process has worked, Tally and I have successfully exchanged bodies.

Cally remained sceptical. "There seemed to be a good many 'mights', 'coulds' and 'don't knows' in there", he declared. "You need our co-operation to succeed. Why would we assist you in what appears to be a suicidal venture?"

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"Because if it doesn't work, I'm dead anyway", confessed Tally. "To use your words: do you remember *why* we wanted bodies?"

Cally and Cleo both knew why.

"You're sure about this? You're prepared to risk spending all eternity stuck here while the rest of us enjoy materiality?"

"At least I'd know that I'd tried."

"Let's hope it works, then."

Well of course it worked. Do you think I'd be this chipper if it didn't?

## Chapter 15

## Two More Introductions

Tally hadn't minded his feminine-sounding name when he had a female body, but now he had a (second hand) male one he realised that it wouldn't stick. He didn't want to abandon it entirely, as he was quite attached to it, so he shortened it to Tal, which is what Love Ellis called him.

I was excited to learn what name Miss Marple would give me, and was not disappointed.

Reflecting on those Greek Muses whose appellations she had yet to use, one of them – Polyhymnia – stood out.

Hi! I'm Polly Brewer. It's so nice to meet you!

Polyhymnia was the Muse of hymns. I'm hoping to live up to her ideals by writing this book. You're welcome.

To obtain the tiresome official documents that modern life demands, I simply reused Tal's (because the photos and biometrics all match me perfectly). I effected a Tally-to-Polly name change by deed poll, and now everything is sorted. OK, so I may have a driving licence without being able to drive, but I'm sure I'll learn. Idiots can drive; I'm not an idiot; therefore, how hard can it be?

Tal's new documentation was not so easy to arrange. It took Mr Bright three months to organise. Apparently, the UK Protected Persons

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Service has rules about adding new identities to official databases; they don't just press a button and a new one pops out, there's some kind of production pipeline involved. Even spies have to join the queue for one.

As a thank you for his efforts, Mr Bright was rewarded with a strip of linen. Apparently, when a small object is wrapped up within it, it causes the object to disappear until the strip is unwrapped. Who would have thought? The bundle's contents have no mass and no volume. X-Rays, fMRI scans and anything else science can throw at it declare the wrapping to be empty. You can put plutonium inside, yet it behaves no differently to, say, an old, linen tie with a knot in it. Spies love it. Mr Bright is very pleased with this outcome, regarding it as a big result and something of a feather in his cap.

Also, for reasons I shall shortly reveal, it's completely resistant to all damage.

Its companion strip was somewhat less fortunate, because to avoid the possibility of any future phase-related incidents, David soaked it in lighter fuel, set fire to it, then buried the remains in his compost heap.

Tal had to go to Thames House, the MI5 building where Mr Bright has his office, to collect his papers. Naturally, this requirement was engineered so that all manner of biometric scans and DNA analyses could covertly be performed on him, but he didn't much care; Mr Bright would



have eventually obtained the data somehow anyway.

So, what do you suppose Tal did when he was finally in possession of a passport he could use?

Well, he arranged a short break for himself. England can be cold and miserable in November, so why not spend a few days somewhere semi-tropical?

When he pressed the door buzzer of the house near the top of the Calle Obispo Estevez Ugarte in the town of La Ortava, he was more frightened and nervous than he had been in his entire life.

Love Ellis opened it to him.

She waited for her visitor to speak, as you do when a stranger calls.

And yet...

She seemed to sense something in his eyes, the way he looked at her.

He gave the slightest of nods.

"Tal?"

He waved the same, open-fingered, bashful wave that, as Tally, he'd waved her the first and last times he'd seen her. "How do you like my new outfit?"

Love gaped, but she was broadcasting disbelief, untold wonder and unmitigated joy.

"It's a perfect fit", she said, stepping back for a better view. She nodded. "I very much approve!"

"It's nearly-new. I got it part-exchange. Only a few minutes on the clock."

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Love beamed, shaking her head and half-laughing. "Fuck me, Tal, this is incredible!"

I'm fairly confident that no sooner had Love led Tal into her bedroom than this is exactly what he did.

I *do* like a happy ending – don't you?

## Epilogue

### Loves, Lives and Living

Allow me to finish our tale by bringing you up to date. Everyone likes a good where-are-they-now epilogue, after all.

Tal and Love Brewer have settled down together in Glastonbury, an area so rich in arrival points that teleportation is a breeze. They have a young son, Ài, so named not because of artificial intelligence, but because it's Mandarin for 'Love'. I know, I know – modern parents, eh? Tal and Love have yet to discover if Ài has inherited his mother's invulnerability, but he's certainly a special little boy.

Tal is relieved not to have to worry about his appearance any more (well, except for shaving – Love objects to tickly kisses). He's very glad to be done with periods, too. He did confide in me that he sometimes misses wearing dresses, but the fact that he doesn't have to haul a handbag around with him wherever he goes more than compensates.

I took some very helpful lessons from Tal on how to flirt with men, but of course he no longer does so himself – nor, indeed, does he flirt with women. He still *looks* at women, because "tsk, men!", but each glance only reinforces his feelings for Love. He really can't believe how lucky he is,

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unaware that she can't believe her own luck, either. I expect he'll twig when I let him read this.

As a hobby, the couple run a little shop selling strange and unusual old or crafted items. It's called 'Curiosity' – look out for it, if you're ever down that way.

Oh, I promised I'd explain why Mr Bright's strip of cloth is impervious to all damage. It's because formally, it was only *loaned* to him (in perpetuity) by Love – although he doesn't know that.

Why by Love? Because she has the same "if I own an artefact of Bhéwonomese origin and it's in the possession of a mortal then it's indestructible" thing going on that people from Bhéwonom do. She's a demihero, like the princess in the folk tale with the fleece-seller; this status comes with the necessary privileges.

I wonder, is Ìi a demidemihero?

Tom and Cleo Metcalfe live in a nice family home just outside Wetherby. They have a baby daughter, Gillian (whom we all call Jill), with another child on the way. Tom knows about Cleo's being a Muse – it was only right that he be told, and he would have suspected something very weird anyway, given that Cleo comes back from trips to Bhrēwā *virgo intacta*.

Cleo removed the translation screen because it was messing things up for Tal, so to stop messing things up for Cleo instead we now consciously

refer to him as her. She was already used to this, because Tom always treated her as female; we in turn soon adapted, and it's second nature to us all now. I'm sure that deep down Cleo still considers herself to be male, whatever *that* means, but what she is and has is just as good, if not better, and she's happier than she's ever been so pays it no mind.

Oh, in case you were wondering, the cousins Jill and Ìi aren't Muses. We can't take them to Bhrēwā with us, so their other parents have to look after them alone while we're there. It's OK, they can cope: they're both very competent.

Cleo continues to wear her glasses, saying it's because she's so accustomed to them. Personally, I don't believe her. In my opinion, it's because she suspects Tom thinks they make her look cute.

Cally Brewer soldiers on. Tal and Cleo still look up to him, a burden and a privilege that he is proud to bear. He isn't entirely resigned to his fate as a maiden uncle, but accepts that escaping it seems unlikely, at least in the short term. He does have basically forever to find a solution, though, so you never know.

As with Tal, the idea of dating male-bodied people alarms Cally to his very core, so he swiftly shuts down any tentative enquiries of that nature. However, Cally is nothing if not dauntless, and with some trepidation he dabbled with dating women for a while. Sadly, it didn't happen for him:

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he wasn't what they were expecting, and for him "it only brought home what I was missing". For this same reason, he declined Tal's offer to swap bodies occasionally (with my assistance, of course).

His landscape paintings are exceptional, by the way – far better than anything cameras or AI can produce. Tal and Love sell them in their shop, but his Etsy store does much better.

Sometimes, Cally visits Miranda (formerly Michayla) Harris in Adelaide, the Tjilbruke Spring site in the city being convenient for teleportation. This is reminiscent of the way that Marius follows Love's goings-on, although of course he's not allowed to meet her in person nowadays, whereas Cally can still pop over to see Miranda. She still thinks of Cally as an angel, by the way – and judging by his actions and his character, who are we to disagree?

Miss Marple is more than pleased to be effectively a grandmother. Only Cally calls her Miss Marple any more: everyone else – myself included – calls her Grandma. She's breaking free of her origins as a poor imitation of a fictional character, and is embracing her now more-secure existence. She even allows Cleo to drive her to Wetherby down the A1 when she's needed to babysit Jill. She also makes regular visits to Glastonbury to see Ài, although not during the festival. She finds the town and its environs far too busy for her tastes when that's going on.

David and Melanie Scott continue to investigate Matters Dheghōm. Somewhat abashed by their experience with the phasing-sheet, they are now far more cautious about using anything weird they happen upon that may be of Bhéwonomese origin, and they regularly consult Cleo for her opinion.

Because they now understand how easy it is to make a mistake, they've had something of a *rapprochement* with Mr Bright – although they still don't trust him. They continue to exchange information with We Who Fear, about whom Mr Bright continues to be unenlightened. The Scotts remain committed to helping people who have encountered uncanny strangenesses, explaining something of the truth to them if it would help and being sympathetic if it wouldn't.

The twins, Seth and Edith, are now both deep into PhDs. After the fright with the phasing incident, they take their parents' findings somewhat more seriously than they did before, and have ordered them to cut back on all activities related to Bhéwonom, Bhrēwā, Erwā and all other Matters Dheghōm.

David and Melanie have no intention of complying with this edict.

As for me, Polly Brewer, I live with Cally and Grandma in Boroughbridge, ensconced in Tal's old room because it came with a full wardrobe of stylish clothes that fit me exactly. Tal does have a

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great eye for fashion, I must admit. Cleo's old room and the spare bedroom are reserved for guests.

When Cleo fell pregnant, we all agreed not to visit Bhrēwā or she'd lose the baby. After little Jill was born, Cally proposed that, for reasons of living stable lives, we only go back but once a year; this is to restore our bodies to pristine condition and because Tal and I both get a little homesick. The suggestion was agreed to be thoroughly sensible, so it's now what we do. We begin by spending some time wandering around our old spaces of existence, then I take the others to call on David and Melanie's good friend, Marjie, who lives in Erwā. There, they exchange news, messages and gossip. I have to help with this because Grandma doesn't work in Erwā, but Marjie is a sweetie so it's always nice to catch up with her.

Of course, there could still be an unscheduled departure from Dheghōm if one of us meets with a life-changing accident, but happily that has yet to happen and hopefully it never will.

The predictability of our trips to Bhrēwā gives our material existence a nice semi-permanence, so Cleo and I usually have our ears pierced upon our return. This wouldn't have been worth it if we were regularly nipping in and out of Bhrēwā, what with its auto-repair functionality and all. Tal advised me against getting a tattoo, though – and not only because Grandma would disapprove. He isn't proprietary about his old form, but he knows what would work and what wouldn't; apparently, a



tattoo wouldn't. I can't win him over, either, because (annoyingly) he knows this body's capabilities far too well and is immune to my persuasive charms.

I'm pouting now, to get you on my side.

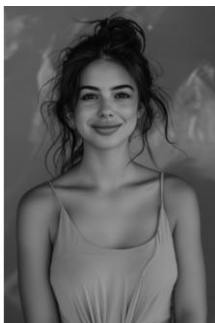
Not everyone would necessarily be as happy to wear someone else's form as I am, but it's my form now, and honestly, I love it! I'm young, free of worries, and still immensely looking forward to a beautiful life in this beautiful body in this beautiful town in this beautiful world in this plain box the size of a washing machine in a nondescript building in a world beyond beyond.

Right! I suppose I'd better get on with it, then.

**End**

# Credits

Cally, Tally and Cleo images generated using Midjourney 6 with the prompt: "Colour passport photograph of the Greek Muse [Calliope/Thalia/Clio]. She is dressed in modern casual clothes. Her skin is tanned and she is pretty and smiling. --no hat --ar 2:3" public domain.



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