

~ Misplaced People ~

by Devize

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Disclaimer:

I would like to introduce you to two women who physically resemble two other women whom we know and love. However, their characters, and everyone else portrayed, are the product of my own sick and twisted imagination.

Warning: there is violence contained within; minor drug taking; and swearing. Lots and lots of swearing. I apologise for this, she wouldn't shut up. There is also sex (eventually) involving two adult and consenting women - if this is illegal where you are, if you are under 18... perhaps you should be reading something else.

Please note: Lleudraeth doesn't exist. The East Metropolitan Borough Council doesn't exist. *This* St Vincent's Hospital doesn't exist. And I'm not entirely sure London exists, but might, in fact, be the product of someone else's sick and twisted imagination.

Also please note: I do not work in the medical profession and I don't speak Welsh. I've done a lot of research into the medical issues and procedures, and the Welsh language; however, I apologise profusely for any errors or mistranslations there might be. In fact, please let me know if you spot any and I'll do my best to change them.

The spelling isn't incorrect, it's just British.

If you're so inclined, explanations to the chapter titles, quote sources and translation of some of the Welsh can be found in endnotes at the foot of each part. You do not have to refer to them to follow the story.

I've read a lot of über alt fiction, but I've been incredibly lax in saying thank you to some truly wonderful bards. So this is my thank you to those who have made us laugh, cry and... well... get rather heated in some inappropriate locations. If there's anybody out there less lax than me in their feedback, my e-mail address is devize@supalife.com

Thanks go to Lynne and Christine for their enthusiasm; and to Boots who kept me thinking, kept me on my toes, and warned me of the dangers of scatter guns and groin-pooling. And especially to Steph for all her help.

For DG, my cariad.

I think that's it. There's 26 chapters ahead of you. Good luck....

* * * * *

"Know ye not then the Riddling of the Bards?
'Confusion, and illusion, and relation,
Elusion, and occasion, and evasion?'"

- Gareth & Lynette, *The Idylls of the King*, Tennyson

MISPLACED PEOPLE
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Chapter 1: *The Princess had no occasion...*¹

She opened her eyes, momentarily.

"She's awake"

"Hello, love, can you hear me? You're in hospital."

Blurred faces... blurred sound... very bright.

"Can you tell how deep that wound is?"

Pain. Big pain.

"We need a CT scan."

Her eyes screwed shut.

"Can you tell me your name, love?"

"Christ, she's going into seizure."

"Make sure she doesn't fall off."

She could feel her body moving, although she didn't want it to. Someone was holding her, the gentlest touch. Hands sure on her shoulders. It felt safe.

She opened her eyes again, although everything seemed so dark now. Except for the eyes. Two perfectly blue eyes, that reminded her of the sky over the bay.

Then her body jolted her into darkness.

* * * * *

She badly, *badly* wanted to tell this pompous sonofabitch to go fuck himself.

"You should have waited for the Security staff."

Badly. "He was so drunk he won't even remember," she said.

"That's not the point. You could have hurt him, if he wasn't hurt already."

"He wasn't hurt already, he'd come in to get out of the rain."

"Then you should have asked him politely to leave."

"Yeah, like that was going to work. He'd been verbally abusing half the genuine patients, waving his dick at the nurses and was about to piss up the reception desk."

"A member of the Accident & Emergency staff should not be seen to manhandle people in that manner..." Striker opened her mouth, about to protest again, but was interrupted, "...not to mention the fact that your language was completely inappropriate for a public waiting area...." Striker opened her mouth again. "St Vincent's Hospital is one of the biggest medical establishments in London and we have a reputation to uphold." That bit she could quote verbatim, and had to stop herself from doing so. "Now, this is not the first time we've had this conversation. You will take this as an official warning. You're a valuable member of this team, and I don't want to lose you, but right now you are walking on very thin ice. Please think about that."

"Go fuck yourself," Striker said as she turned and marched out of the office.

"I'll pretend I didn't hear that," she heard as she slammed the door.

Another day in the fun factory.

Okay, so maybe she had been a little rough on the drunk. Personally, she preferred to think she'd given him some assistance in the genitalia department - pulled him in the right direction, so to speak - he obviously didn't know what to do with it. Most of those present had been grateful - she'd even heard a spontaneous smatter of applause - but some little shit had complained. She knew it was that little rat-faced guy who had given Ria such a hard time. Maybe she should have just turned the drunk round and got him to piss in his lap.

Striker strode through the now quiet A&E, ignoring Ria's call. She was in a foul mood, she had a blinding headache, and she wanted to take it out on someone. But not Ria. Besides, she was in street clothes, she was off shift and she was going home.

But she stopped as soon as the cold, damp, February air hit her face.

It wasn't the rain that brought Striker to a halt, or the thought of the cramped and dreary journey home, or that Danny was out and there would be no one at the end of that journey.

She closed her eyes for a moment, and clearly saw the woman's face: deathly pale skin framed by bloodied auburn hair, and those eyes. Eyes as deep and wild green as the sea. That single moment seemed to have lasted forever. Striker had held her like a baby as she watched those eyes fade like the moon setting.

Oh dear God, I've got it bad.

Her hand went inside her jacket and brushed against the cigarette packet.

These facts were known. The woman had a head injury, she had been operated on, and now she was in the care of the ICU. Coma had been induced to stop her brain from swelling as a result of her injury and the subsequent surgery. But Striker did not know... no one knew... the woman's name.

She had been found, unconscious, in a dark and unsafe area of east London, presumably the victim of a mugging. She might have been hit from behind, she might have fallen and hit her head. Either way she was left with no identity, bar a police file. She was alone.

It was that that gnawed at Striker. This woman was alone with no one to support her, hold her hand, reassure her in the depths of her coma. This woman whose body she had held, and in whose frightened eyes she had drowned.

How many patients had she seen over her time at St Vincent's? How many patients had she supported, helped, talked to, genuinely felt for? Those who had been surrounded by families, friends, acolytes - and there had been that one guy with the goat; she shook her head at that memory.

And always those who had been alone.

But ultimately, looking back, through all of the life and death that passed through these doors, in the true spirit of professional detachment, no one meant a whole lot more to her than a drunk or a rat-faced guy.

Except this woman.

So, in a gentle revelation in the middle of a sleepless night, Striker had decided to be the one to support her, to hold her hand and reassure her. To be that friendly voice that would lead her back home.

The thought and the rain soothed her... slightly... until she saw, through the diminishing shower, the rusty car parked in the darkened lot. She smiled, feeling the reassuring gush of anger through her blood. She stalked towards the vehicle and knocked on the window.

Slowly, it was wound down, releasing air rancid with the stink of beer and the bittersweet reek of dope smoke. "Excuse me," she said sweetly to the four teenage inhabitants, "you can't stop here. This area is reserved for ambulances."

The response was what she had hoped for. They laughed. *What's the point of rebelling against the society by becoming an asshole?*

"You do realise that you could be endangering lives if you blocked an ambulance's ingress?"

A gruff voice came back to her from within the car, "Yeah, right. I don't see any ambulances around here, do you, Yank?" This was greeted with laughter.

"That's beside the point." Striker smiled. "Of course, the hospital is within its rights to call the police, should you continue to park here, and I'm sure they would be equally interested in that substance you're smoking."

"I'd like to see you try."

"We like it here, we're not moving."

And then the voice closest to her said, "Unless you want to get in 'ere and we'll really show you how to park," followed by more laughter. This last comment was also accompanied by a large bubble of saliva, which landed with a splat on her jacket.

This seemed to cause even more hilarity, until Striker reached in through the window and pulled the nearest teen halfway out of the car. Her hands gripping his collar, he dangled precariously over the tarmac.

She brought his face close to her own and stared him in the eyes. "Would you care to repeat that?"

Caught in the headlights of her gaze, he made a strangled, squeaking noise.

"I didn't think so. Now, I've had a shitty day and I don't need a little dick like you to make it worse, because then you'd be in *serious* trouble. So the first thing you're gonna do to make me feel better is clean my jacket."

The young man brought his arm up and wiped the spit away with his sleeve.

"And the second thing you're going to do is leave. Okay?"

He nodded.

"Good boy." She dropped him back through the window. She caught the shocked expressions of the faces of his friends. "Thank you. Now fuck off."

Striker watched as the car coughed to life and moved off as fast it could.

She felt so much better for that.

And, with her temper calmed, she turned on her heel and made her way to the ICU.

It wasn't strange to see Striker's tall, dark figure pacing halls of St Vincent's Hospital at any time of day or night, so no one gave her a second glance. It was late, past dinner time, past the normal lights out. Here and there were pockets of activity: little dramas that filled the evening with noise and light. But Striker ignored them and found herself at the churchlike corner that was Intensive Care.

The woman was in the last bed of the ward, discreetly separated by her room-mates by a half-pulled curtain. Machines, like gargoyles, watched her every breath and heartbeat, every movement of blood in her veins.

Striker stood for a moment, her own movement stilled by the sudden reality of what she was doing.

She was caring. And every single nerve-ending was screaming a warning.

But a look at the pale skin, the auburn lashes lying against white cheeks, lids hiding those eyes, and Striker knew she had no choice.

So she pulled a chair to the side of the bed, careful not to disturb any of the technology surrounding them, or the other patients in their own worlds. And again put her hand inside her jacket.

Her late night revelation had been followed by a decision. She would read to her. They were strangers, with no knowledge of each other's history - she couldn't talk about her life, she couldn't refer to memory. And her normal vocabulary seemed to scare children and hospital managers. Reading would give her something to say, and maybe focus the woman's mind. She thought long and hard about what she might read, but chose in the end something safe and familiar... maybe familiar enough for the woman as well.

Carefully, she slid the old book out of her jacket the cover brushing comfortably against the smooth, dark leather, and made immediately for the marked page. With one further glance down the ward towards the empty corridor outside, she leaned forward, and quietly started to read.

"Once upon a time there lived a King and a Queen, who lacked but one thing on earth to make them entirely happy. The King was young, handsome and wealthy; the Queen had a nature as good and gentle as her face was beautiful; and they adored one another, having married for love - which among kings and queens is not always the rule. Moreover, they reigned over a kingdom at peace, and their people were devoted to them. What more, then, could they possibly want?"

As softly as a summer breeze, Striker's words breathed a different life into the clinical room, and, should anyone have been listening, they would have been carried away to another time where a princess can sleep for a hundred years and be wakened by a single, sweet kiss....

But no one was listening, except the captive woman in the bed. And she was as still and unresponsive as the sanitised walls around them.

So Striker's secret was safe. As the princess and her prince lived happily ever after, she closed the book, placed it carefully back into her leather jacket and stood. Briefly, she grazed the woman's hand with her own. Then, at a loss for words, she left.

* * * * *

The second night she was caught. A soft step interrupted the two ugly sisters choosing their ballgowns and Striker jumped, dropped both the book and the woman's hand, and spun up from her seat.

"Jesus, you gave me a shock," she said, relieved at who she found behind her.

"And you never fail to surprise me," Kishen Mistry said.

"You're here late, aren't you?"

"And you're *here*. Shouldn't you be beating people up in A&E?"

Striker grinned. "We offer the full service down there: break 'n' mend."

"And what are you doing here?"

She ducked her head. "Reading."

"Thank you for stating the obvious." He picked the book up from the floor and raised an elegant eyebrow at the cover. *Sleeping Beauty and Other Fairy Tales*.

"She's alone," Striker said. "No one's got time to spend with her."

Kishen raised his other eyebrow and handed the book back to her. "You're a good person, Striker."

"Yeah, well don't tell anybody. I've got a reputation."

"Oh, yeah, and a damn Yankee attitude."

She pulled herself up to her full height and looked down on him from her two inch advantage.

"Hey, without that damn Yankee attitude half the crap wouldn't be done round here."

"Including reading fairy stories to patients."

"Kish...."

"Striker, what you're doing is a good thing. I'm not going to stop you from doing this because you're attached to a different department. I'll let the nurses know what you're doing. They'll leave you to it." He paused and smiled. "Of course, this could be valuable information: big, bad Striker reads fairy stories...."

"Get out of here, before I kick that cute ass of yours."

"You would as well, wouldn't you?" Kishen said, and got out of there.

Striker turned back to the woman and reached out for her hand again. Her voice lowered and softened. "Hey, sorry about that. But Mr Mistry's a good guy. You'll be okay with him. You'll be okay." She squeezed the hand. Despite its stillness it felt warm and soft. "Um... where were we?"

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Always the busiest night of the week. It had started with a pitched battle between two gangs of rival soccer supporters. Then two separate road accidents had added to the usual late Saturday human detritus of drunken brawls and drunker teenagers. It had made Accident and Emergency a conveyor belt of blood, vomit and body parts, and Striker's shift had stretched into the early hours. The staff were always reassured by Striker's attendance on a night like this. Her height and strong, authoritative presence would often be enough to quell any confrontations, and if not... more than one would-be combatant had found their backside cooling on the pavement outside A&E, or being handed over, caught in an iron grip, to security guards.

Now it was quiet. Again Striker stood in the entrance of A&E and watched the rain fall - each drop spotlighted by the street lamp, before it fell into darkness. A soundtrack of dripping and the whoosh of tyres on the wet road ahead greeted her ears.

"Does it do anything but fucking rain in this goddamned country?" she muttered to herself.

She pulled out a crumpled packet of cigarettes, extracting one with her lips before lighting it. She huddled into the corner of the covered entrance - the last point of shelter before the wet night could claim her - so as not to block the doorway, so as not to be seen by the anti-smoking brigade.

She could just leave: catch the night bus, go home, see if Danny was back, just chill, talk, laugh, sink a few.... But she knew she wasn't going to.

This was a new kind of escape. It would take her far away from the cold rain, and the dismal apartment, and the unpaid rent, and her search....

She flung her half-smoked cigarette into the night, turned and stole back into the hospital.

Striker nodded at the duty nurse at the ICU station and found her seat by the bed.

She took the woman's hand. "Hi," she said. "I'm sorry I'm a little late today. People like to kill each other on Saturday nights." *And on Tuesday nights.* The fourth night since she'd been brought in. Why did it feel like forever?

Normally, at this point she would have opened the book to start reading, but instead she simply sat there, gazing at the woman's still countenance. *Who are you?*

But did she want to know? The moment she found her identity, Striker knew she would lose her.

The woman was thin, but not painfully so. Striker thought she had caught a glimpse of gently-toned muscles on her arms. There was no sign of abuse: she had seen enough drug users and prostitutes pass through A&E to recognise the signs. Striker thought she must be a few years younger than herself, even early twenties. She had a young face. Perhaps that's why Striker felt so protective of her: it felt so wrong that she was here. She could picture her in the country, surrounded by green hills, or staring out to sea... not getting attacked in a dark, wet London street.

Her voice seemed to spill out of its own accord.

"I'm so sorry this has happened to you," she said. "You seem such a gentle person... so beautiful." She let her hand drift over the woman's cheek. "I don't know you... but I feel like I do. Is that crazy?" She rested her hand against the woman's still jaw. "I don't want you to be alone. You may have family out there, friends... a... boyfriend..." the word caught in her throat.... "and they're searching for them. The police are out there looking. But in the meantime, know that you're not alone, okay?" Without thinking, she lifted the small, soft hand and brought it to her lips, letting the kiss linger there for just a moment.

Then she laid it back on the bed, and lifted out the book. "I brought something different to read today. This is a book that my mom used... Oh God!"

Striker had lifted her eyes to the woman's face, and found sea-green looking back at her. She stilled her breathing.

"Can you understand me?"

There was no response, just the clear, green gaze. Striker got up, and called back to the nurse's station, "Maggie, could you call the duty doctor?" But she never stopped the fall into those eyes.

* * * * *

"Sir, you've come to the wrong entrance. This is the Accident and Emergency department."

"Can't you just..."

"You need to go to the main reception in the other building...."

"Please... could you just...."

"Sir...."

"Can I help at all?" Striker went up to the desk, addressing her question more to Ria than the man, but it was he who started talking again. His eyes closed in frustration at having to explain himself again.

He was speaking so fast, Striker could only make out a few words tinged with a strong, lilting accent that she didn't immediately recognise. "Sir, can you calm down a little. I can't understand what you're saying."

The man took a deep breath, turned and looked her straight in the eye.

And immediately, Striker knew why he was here as she looked deep into green.

He looked like a kid who'd grown up to fast... physically and emotionally. He spoke slowly, punctuating his speech with shaking breaths. "My sister's been missing... for almost a week. The police said a woman... was brought here a few days ago. She matches my sister's description. Please..."

Jesus Christ... that desperation.

"Come with me."

She led him down corridors, a labyrinthine maze that only she and a few prepared others could ever seem to penetrate. *Just call me Theseus....* The young man kept up with her, long legs and anxiety drawing him on as well as any ball of string. She didn't say anything - it wasn't her place to. It was important to maintain the woman's confidentiality. What if this man wasn't her brother? What if this was a complete stranger who, by total coincidence, also had those impossible eyes?

Yeah, right.

The man didn't say anything. Already breathless with worry, he had nothing left to ask questions. Striker was grateful for that.

Intensive Care, already. And there she was, a few auburn wisps peeking out from under the bandage around her head; her eyes closed now, her skin as pale as the sheets. The only noise the electronic pulse of the cardiograph and the breath of three people.

And then a gasp. The young man went to the bed, moving slowly, as if the woman before him was a child paralysed by fright. He said something almost under his breath - a different language - Striker didn't catch it. He reached out and took the woman's hand and squeezed it; then turned and looked Striker in the eye... and nodded.

For one moment, Striker wondered if she wanted to know, or if she could walk out of there and keep her fantasy. But her mouth reacted before her brain decided: "What's her name?"

"Morien," he said, "Morien Llewelyn," turning back to his sister.

And Striker left, almost colliding with Kishen Mistry. "Striker, what's going on?"

"The mystery woman," Striker said, "she's not a mystery anymore."

Chapter 2: *The first sight of the sea*

"You don't look too good."

"I don't feel too good."

Striker was sitting on the bench on the strip of grass to the side of A&E. She lit her cigarette, then leant back, enjoying the sun on her face.

"What's wrong?" Kishen sat next to her, gingerly; the bench still damp from the night's passing shower.

"Nothin', just tired. Haven't been sleeping too well, that's all."

"Are you taking anything?"

"No. They make me sleep, but pills screw me up when I'm awake. Put me off my work." Not that she hadn't thought about it. Maybe she ought to get herself some, just so one night she could give into inclination and take the whole fucking bottle.

"I haven't seen you around so much."

"Been doing a lot of nights."

"Since Parker left?"

"Since he got his sick ass dismissed, yeah."

"Inquiry pending?"

"Inquiry pending."

The two of them sat in silence and watched the shift change. A few greeted the couple on the bench. Kishen acknowledged them with a nod of the head, Striker with a flick of cigarette ash. It was strange how those coming in for the nine-to-five looked more exhausted and more drawn than those who were now emerging from the hospital buildings, eyes-wide and wired in the June morning. Kishen looked at Striker.

"So, why aren't you sleeping?"

Inside Striker something malicious let loose a hollow laugh.

Because every time I close my eyes I see her. Because every time I fall asleep I dream I'm with her. Because when I'm supposed to be sleeping off the night shift, I'm standing at the corner of her street waiting for a glimpse of her.

God help me, I feel like I'm drowning.

Striker hadn't seen her face-to-face since that last day in the ICU, when her brother had come to claim her. She'd had a reason to be with the woman when she'd been alone and nameless. The woman could be what Striker wanted her to be. She could be the Sleeping Beauty and Cinderella and Artemis and Guinevere and Juliet and Branwen....

But watching her, watching and learning, the terrible truth dawned: Striker realised that Morien Llewelyn *was* the Sleeping Beauty and Cinderella and Artemis and Guinevere and Juliet and Branwen and she was so much more. In Striker's eyes, she was perfect.

But Morien Llewelyn had family. A lot of family. When she had woken from her coma they were there to support her and comfort her and hold her hand, and it was as if the few nights Striker had spent with her had never existed.

Except in Striker's mind. She remembered every detail: the way her skin had felt under her hand, the colour of her short hair against the bandages, those eyes suddenly opening.... And each time they opened, in Striker's imagination, they held something different in the depths: gratitude, recognition, love, disinterest, outright rejection.

But even staring into that green rejection, Striker couldn't bring herself to break the connection.

So despite her self-exile from the ICU, it had been easy to check on the basic details of Morien's progress when she'd seen Kishen - it was a healthy interest in some one whom she'd looked after, Striker reasoned.

It had been easy to find out her home address from the hospital records - out of natural curiosity.

It had been easy to take the Tube to the area, stand a little way down the street as Morien was welcomed home with open arms - just to make sure she was safe and sound.

It had been easy to see her recovery, it had been a joy to see her recovery, watching the longer and longer trips into the outside world, accompanied by her brother, her father, the older couple Striker assumed were grandparents, others male and female - to ensure the wellbeing of a past patient.

It had been easy to follow her when she finally returned to her own apartment on Easthouses Terrace, to follow her when she went back to work. Just to *see* her.

Everything she did now was in reference to Morien. She saw Morien in the books she read, in the TV shows she watched. She heard Morien in the music that Danny played, in the snippets of sounds from passing car stereos, in the vacuous pop that seemed to saturate hospital radio. She would wander round shops, wondering what books she would choose, what food she would pick, what clothes she would wear - until she caught herself in the queue for the checkout, a pretty, flowered dress draped over her arm, in Morien's size.

Only then Striker did acknowledge that this was obsession.

Easy obsession, as comfortable as an old pair of slippers. Poised before her inevitable drop into horror.

Striker knew that it would have been easy just to walk up to her, introduce herself, ask her out for a coffee. Among the many people with whom Morien seemed to surround herself, Striker had seen no one special, no one as close to Morien as Striker wanted to be. There would be days when that thrill of courage would taunt her into taking the next step. *Hi. My name is Striker West. I work at St Vincent's. I've seen you around and I think you're really beautiful. I was wondering if you'd like to go out with me some time?* She'd repeated the words over and over in her head. But she never took that step. She was too terrified of that green-eyed rejection.

On days like that she'd leave her vigil and go home, tear into her bedroom, wrap herself in the bedcovers and cigarette smoke, and will sleep to come.

But sleep would elude her in the never-ending passageways of green-eyed thought.

She'd get up, search the cupboards for alcohol, try and drink herself into slumber. But her dreams would pick at her sanity, like birds pulling at worms.

Jerked out of unconsciousness she'd want to lose herself in other worlds. So she'd read. And read and read and read, but see *her* in every page and every narrative and every word. She had never needed her mother as much as she did now.

Then she would pick up the latest phone book with a flutter of hope and dread, and find where she'd left off. "Hello, is that Mr Lawrence J. Bailey? Hello, Mr Bailey, I'm sorry to bother you, sir. I was wondering if you had any connection with...."

And when the negative responses, the apologies, the dial tone became too much, she'd stare at the ceiling until Danny came home.

She'd been doing that a lot lately, creeping into Danny's bed just to feel a pair of arms around her. Sometimes they would just lie there, and Striker would find sleep simply by being held. Sometimes it would develop into something more, and there would be a different kind of release against Danny's hard, smooth body. But afterwards Striker would slip out from under the covers to return to her own room and lie awake hating herself and the way her body tingled for someone other than Danny's hands.

But at least with Danny there were no strings. He didn't judge, he didn't expect anything of her, just as much as she didn't expect anything of him - except his share of the bills each month. She didn't even expect him to offer his bed: there had been times when she'd thought to go to him and found someone else taking up 'her' side. It didn't bother her, in fact the sight was often a relief. Danny offered friendship and comfort, whether emotional, physical or occasionally 'medicinal'. And Danny knew not to ask awkward questions.

Striker was aware that Kishen was waiting for an answer. She shrugged. "Don't know why I'm not sleeping," she said.

"Anything wrong at work?"

"No, work's fine."

And it was. Her work had been the one aspect of her life that had given her some balance. She walked through the door of A&E and she could lose herself in her duties and in the lives of the patients and the staff, and in emotional detachment. Ironic that so many people found the Accident and Emergency department stressful. Right now, Striker was doting on its turmoil. She was clinging to it as if it was the only thing keeping her alive.

It was the outside that was so stressful. That's why Striker was sitting here, putting off that evil moment when she had to launch herself back into reality. The bench had become a look-out point between the cognizable world of the hospital and the uncharted lands of life. She could sit on this bench and watch the traffic on the road, the people scurrying to and fro, the buildings dirty from pollution and age, the pigeons picking and worrying the gutters and flying into the unknown, and see the large copperplate letters that branded it all: *Here Be Dragons*.

Kishen watched her as Striker put her head back on the bench, her long dark hair escaping its braid and flowing out behind her. She blew out a stream of smoke, and stretched her endless, jean-encased legs in front of her. If he hadn't been happily married... if he'd been into six foot women....

"Look," he said, "if you ever want to talk...."

"I know where you are," Striker replied, turning her sky blue gaze onto him and smiling. "You're going to be late."

Kishen glanced at his watch and stood, wincing at the dampness of his trousers.

"Don't worry, there's some nice dry scrubs waiting for you indoors."

"You don't have that option," he smiled.

"I haven't got a wet ass." At which point, Kishen noticed that neatly folded under her was her leather jacket.

"Thanks for sharing."

"Anytime."

"Oh, go home and get some sleep," said Kishen with a mock scowl and made his way into the building as comfortably as his pants would allow.

Go home and get some sleep. *Unlikely.*

Striker looked at the world in front of her. Two days. This was the first weekend she'd had off in weeks. This was the first forty-eight hour period she'd had off in weeks. This was why she was still sitting on the bench in front of A&E.

She didn't want to do this anymore, it was tearing her apart. But the thought of not seeing her.... Striker let out a breath.

She flicked the remains of her cigarette at a pigeon and watched it toy with the stub until it quickly realised it wasn't food.

Comes to something when I'm not as smart as a stupid pigeon.

She watched it fly away and made a decision. She got her feet, shook out her jacket and tossed it over her shoulder. She'd go to the nearest Underground station and, whether it was the gutter or the stars, she'd see which way her wings took her.

* * * * *

"I'm sorry, Morien," he said. "It's orders from on high," he said, "we've got to concentrate on our most immediate concerns," he said. "There isn't the budget," he said. "There isn't the manpower."

Go womanpower, she thought

"Keith, I've done a lot of work on this," she said in one last valiant attempt to keep the project, "I don't want to just drop it."

"I know," Keith said, his messy hair quivering slightly with his earnestness, "I do understand, really. But I need you on the Woodhall Estate project. This is a huge project for us and we've got a tight deadline on that and I need as many people as possible."

And she knew she couldn't compare the regeneration of an entire estate with a single, forgotten street. He'd taken her proposal and dropped it into his pending tray.

Keith's Pending Tray, the black hole of paperwork.

She couldn't let him lose it.

She'd almost given her life for it.

She'd lost three and a half months of work, her car, most of her hair, her peace of mind, her memory of four days... and something else... something that also tapped at the corner of her mind. Something strangely reassuring that made her sleep soundly at night, that made her smile without realising it. Something small amidst all the towering fears and pain of the last few months. Something small that was at risk of being... not lost, but... misplaced.

Which is why she was now heading through the doors of the empty council building.

"It's Saturday, you're not supposed to be here," a voice said in her ear. And she jumped at the heavy breath at her ear and turned round. For a glaring second she left the light, airy foyer and was back on a darkened Tumblety Street.

Her heart was pounding. "Wayne, you gave me such a fright," she said to the grinning security guard. His teeth were crooked and there was sweat on his top lip. "I've just got to nip up to the office. I left my mobile there last night. I'll only be a couple of minutes."

"Go on then, gorgeous. I'll be waiting for you." Wayne winked.

Morien smiled sweetly. *Lecherous yob.*

She made her way up to the Regeneration Unit and thanked God that no one was diligent enough to be working this weekend. It was easy to spot Keith's desk. It was the one that couldn't be seen for paper. Somewhere, buried beneath the paperwork for the Woodhall Estate project, and the Larkhall Street project, and the Paradise Towers project, and more for the Woodhall Estate project, were three treasured photos of his family. His wife, affectionately known as Councillor Mrs Keith, his two little girls - whose names always escaped Morien - and a dog called Buttons. Keith was a good boss, he was a nice man, he was harried man, and Morien often wondered how he functioned in this mountain, how he ever kept track of anything, including his family. Today

she hoped to goodness that he didn't, and managed to extract the easily-recognisable blue folder of the Tumblety Street proposal from the pending tray without causing an avalanche.

She checked through the few sheets inside, ensuring that nothing was missing, and found herself stopping at the sight of a large photograph. A single building, achingly familiar. Morien had felt drawn to the little building that seemed so incongruous secreted between the giant walls of the disused warehouses on Tumblety Street. The chapel reminded her of home.

So, she'd done a little research, found out as much about the building's history, and the street's history, as she could, even discovered a list of possible councillors they could approach for go-ahead, and started to put together a proposal for its restoration.

And one afternoon in February she'd wandered down Tumblety Street - its row of tumbling houses, its towering warehouses - again to gaze at the old Salem Chapel; again to open the creaking, rusty gate into the little yard, weeds peering out from between the paving stones; and again to rattle the front door in the vain hope that maybe, this time, it would open. The building was owned by the council, but over the dark, dank pool of time, someone had lost the key. This didn't surprise her.

Morien had meant to leave: the afternoon was fading fast to evening, and the shadows around the chapel were darkening. But she had thought to walk up the little path between the chapel and its neighbouring warehouse to try and spot another way in. She had checked around her, she had made certain that no one lurked in those shadows. She had reminded herself that the Whitechapel horrors were miles south and a century ago.

And then she'd woken up in hospital.

Morien brushed her hand over the scarf that covered her head and closed the folder. Strange how she didn't feel scared at seeing the chapel again. If anything, she felt more determined: she was not going to let the last few months be for nothing.

She'd work on the Woodhall Estate project, continue her research into Tumblety Street, and bide her time.

Resolved, she slipped the folder into her bag and locked the office door behind her.

Downstairs, Wayne was sitting with his feet up on the security desk, watching the sports news on television. Morien fished her mobile phone out of her bag and waved it at him. "Gimme your number and I'll give you a call tonight, all right, darlin'?" he shouted.

She laughed politely and got the hell out.

The Underground station was close to the council offices and she dived down into its entrance, determined to spend the rest of the day at her leisure: a little window shopping, a little browsing, maybe a trip to Charing Cross Road. A feeling like sunrise inside her made her revel in the freedom. For the first time in four months she could do what she wanted. Her brother wasn't

pushing her to a family get-together. There was no kindly, avuncular invitation. No hurried, better-include-Morien calls from cousins. There was no one there to fuss, no one there to check up on her, no one reminding her for the tenth time that day that she had to take those damn pills.

Yes, thank you. I know. I've damn well taken them. I'll take the whole damn lot if it'll make you happy.

Bless them. Her family were wonderful, and she wouldn't be without them, but sometimes she felt like she couldn't breathe.

It had been glorious moving back to the flat - despite the provisos. It had been glorious having nothing but herself and her books for company. It had been glorious hearing nothing but her own breathing - until the phone would ring and it would be her brother asking the inexorable question. "Yes, Drake, I've taken my pills, thanks." *I love you, bach.* She never thought she'd get frustrated at the sound of the telephone. She'd never appreciated being alone before - almost felt guilty in the enjoyment. Was that why she hadn't opened her letter from Peru? It was still in her bag, hidden somewhere under the blue folder.

But despite her solitude, she'd never felt lonely, as if someone was watching over her. And sometimes there would be that strange, uneasy feeling of being followed.

It had been growing of late.

She glanced down the carriage of the train as she sat down. It wasn't too busy for this time on a Saturday morning, at the beginning of the line. A couple of men who looked as if they were going to a business meeting had just stepped on. Morien wanted to remind them it was Saturday. They stood at the end of the carriage: obviously too virile to sit down. A scratching beat, as annoying as a mosquito in the dark, came from a young man too cool to wear his cap the right way round and too cool to notice the two teenage girls opposite flirting with him. Further down, there was a woman with big boots and a black leather jacket. She had shockingly pink hair.

Morien reached for her bag, bypassed the folder and the letter, pulled out a book and began to read.

*Our first sight of the sea
is the nearest we ever get
to discovering a marvel.*

*Like voice, a temple of the head,
she stands, to divide heaven
and earth, welkin and waters.* ²

A voice. Just a voice.

She could hear it in her head, above the clatter of the train and the insect rhythm of the young man's personal stereo. But she couldn't catch the words; couldn't quite catch the tone, the accent even. But the voice was calming and gentle and kind and reminded her of her childhood and her mother reading to her. Over the last few months Morien had often caught herself listening out for the voice when she needed reassurance or to know she was not alone. When she thought she was being followed.... There'd be a movement in the corner of her eye, in the shadow of her mind; or the rhythmic beats of footsteps that would stop as she stopped, leaving only the sound of her heart pounding. She would turn, convinced she would see an attacker, hand raised ready to strike and frozen in time. And she would be confronted by nothing: a frightening, echoing void of not-knowing and confusion.

And she'd find herself running, not knowing what she was running from.

And underneath the hammering of her own footsteps and her heartbeat, she'd hear the voice and she wouldn't feel scared any more.

Morien became aware that she'd been staring at the same stanza of poetry for the last three stops, while people came and went around her. She had to change trains at the next station, but unwilling to lose the poem she searched for a bookmark. Nothing.

Strangely hesitant to touch the letter, she reached again for the folder and drew a random piece of notepaper from the back of it, folding it carefully, and placing it in the book.

The train squeaked to a halt.

* * * * *

Take your partners for the Saturday Lunchtime Crush. People flocked from the suburbs and beyond to enjoy the experience. Morien found herself waltzing with a tall, dark-haired woman wearing a daisy-covered dress. She was tempted to ask where the woman had bought it, but the tide through the ticket hall swept her on.

She had had enough of the multitude and now just needed to change trains to get home.

Morien made her way down the platform, snaking through the clusters of people who had placed themselves in such strategically awkward positions that she wondered if this was some new reality game. She could see it now. The host with the cheesy grin and expensive suit: *Morien Llewelyn, let's see how long it takes you to get from one end of the platform to the other, but remember (twinkle, twinkle) you can't move anybody's luggage, ask anybody to move (because they won't understand English or they'll simply ignore you) or invade anybody's personal space. Although, of course, they can invade yours. Starting from....*

What the hell was that?

Morien had just reached a clearing in the human jungle when she stopped in her tracks. She was being watched again. But it was more than that; it was like something was summoning her, like the pull of a log fire on a winter's day. Yes, that was it. It was like a fire bursting into life behind her.

She turned round, almost scared of what she would find.

And no one was watching.

Not again.

People were talking, reading their papers, rifling through their bags, staring at the advertisements covering the walls, gazing down the tunnel, willing the train to come. A small flurry of suits moving further down the platform, behind them one woman, looking intently down at her feet.

What was it about her...?

She was taller than average, with long, dark hair. Something about her...?

She was dressed as so many other people on the crowded platform: jeans, a long, faded t-shirt, what looked like a leather jacket thrown over one shoulder, and apparently fascinating old, black boots.

There was something....

The woman nibbled a full bottom lip and glanced up, and Morien's breath caught as she was lost in the bluest gaze she'd ever seen.

For her part, Striker felt like she was a squid staring down a tidal wave.

Last time I ever leave anything to fucking Fate. She'd sensed rather than seen Morien weaving her way down the platform, and had come very, very close to running away screaming. Until she realised that would draw attention to herself. What was the likelihood that Morien would see her, much less recognise her?

"Do I know you?" Morien asked. Her voice was soft,

Striker was at a loss for words. How was she going to explain herself to this woman? This woman, who had featured in her dreams from the first moment she'd stared into those helpless eyes. This woman, whom she'd cared for and watched over and followed for long hours like some stalker. Exactly like a stalker. This woman, for whom she'd created a whole fantasy life, and who was now standing in front of her in all her solid reality waiting for her to say something. What in the hell could she say?

"Um... yeah... hi." *Oooh, Ms Eloquence.*

Morien waited, wondering if anything else was coming, but all the woman did was break into an almost sheepish grin. The woman was beautiful. Very beautiful. Though she looked as if she didn't know it, or didn't care. Her hair was carelessly tied back into a loose braid. She looked as if she'd had bangs once, but they'd grown out and feathered, become wispy tresses escaping from the plait. Her face look sculptured: high cheekbones, determined chin... those eyes. She would not have forgotten this woman. Ever.

"Where do I know you from?" she pressed.

"Um..." *I'm the woman who fell in love with the colour of your eyes, whispered sweet nothings to you for hours and now wants to lick chocolate cookie dough ice cream out of your belly button.* She said, "I work at Vinnie's - St Vincent's Hospital."

"Oh," Morien said, and paused. There was more, she knew that, but she went for the obvious. "You're American."

Suddenly, it felt like safer ground. "And that's not a London accent."

Morien found the woman's grin infectious. "Well, I'm Welsh. God..." she said as Striker launched herself at her.

"Fucking *assholes!*" Striker exclaimed at the group of asking-for-it young men who'd pushed past her. They ignored her, save for a few sniggers. "Sorry," she said extracting herself from Morien's grip as quickly as possible, hoping that she couldn't feel her heart jack-hammering against her chest. She resisted the urge to dust the Welsh woman down; she wanted her heart to stay in her body. "You okay? I didn't hurt you, did I?"

"No, I'm fine."

"And since you left Vinnie's?"

Morien smiled at the genuine concern in the woman's eyes. "Yes, I've been fine." She unconsciously touched a hand to the scarf that covered her head. "Really."

"You look fantastic," Striker said; then bit her tongue, knowing it was too much to say. But fantastic, she knew, was an understatement. Morien looked beautiful to her. She wore a loose-fitting white blouse, the laces at the neck were teasingly unfastened. Tiny flowers were embossed around the collar. Her blue jeans clung to her slim legs, embroidered pink daisies blossoming around the denim ankle. And tiny vines of multi-coloured petals entwined themselves around the blue headscarf.

She even carried a bag covered in blue, tapestry flowers.

*Blodeuwedd, maiden of flowers*³ twined itself round Striker's mind, but this Blodeuwedd had her heart shining from her beautiful, green eyes.

"Have the police...?"

"No, nothing. But then, I'm not being particularly helpful. I can't remember anything...." They were pushed forward as a crush of people struggled to see the approaching train.

"It's a damn train... big mettle thing... you can't miss it, specially if you're on the fucking track." Morien grinned at Striker's muttering, and at the protective hand that clutched her shoulder.

"You coming my way?" she asked.

"I'm not sure I have a choice," Striker replied as they were carried through the doors.

The carriage was packed. Sardine room only. All the contestants in the reality game show now forced together for a mobile endurance test. By virtue of her height, Striker was able to reach the metal pole attached to the ceiling. Morien wasn't so lucky, and clutched the nearest object for support as the train lurched forward. It happened to be Striker. Morien glanced up with an apologetic half-smile, that made Striker look away for fear of betraying herself.

This was hell.

The woman she had idolised from afar was now pressed up against her in a way that, had they been horizontal, would have had Striker flushed, panting and galloping towards orgasm. Their current situation might not, normally, have stopped Striker. She didn't give a shit what people thought. She certainly wouldn't have given a shit about any potential gropée.

But this was Morien Llewelyn, and she couldn't have endured the pain of distrust and disgust in those green eyes - she'd seen it enough in her nightmares. So she suffered Morien's steadying touch on her arm, to stop her from falling in the swaying carriage, and wondered what the fuck happened now.

They caught each other's glance again. A nervous smile, then lost in the embarrassing silence of the newly-acquainted, looking anywhere but at each other.

Striker stared in fascination at the tube map over the door. Not taking in the slightest detail of the coloured lines that snaked across the surface and London.

Morien looked down. And something caught her eye. Something between her feet.

Striker couldn't help but tremble as her companion suddenly shimmied down, her small, lithe body seeming to find gaps where there were none, and Striker's temperature rose several degrees at the brush of the small woman against her. Morien wiggled back up again with something in her hand. A wallet. Shiny black leather with gold initialling in one corner: N. C. T.

She glanced at Striker. "Is this yours?"

Striker shook her head. Damn, it would have been easy to say yes and pocket what was inside.

Another time, another place, and definitely not with Morien.

She's too good for me.

Morien looked round for a possible owner.

They were surrounded by the sniggering young men from the platform: jeaned, t-shirted, and baseball capped. Somehow, Striker sensed that Morien felt intimidated by the boys. She seemed to shrink from them, as far as she was able, edging back against Striker. Dark thoughts taunted, for a moment. Was Morien any safer with her?

But the Welsh woman had guessed at the wallet's owner.

"Excuse me, sir..."

A large, suited businessman peeled his attention back from the fleeting shadows in the black and speeding tunnel outside. They could barely see him for the press of bodies around them. Nothing but the suit and a shock of blond hair. He didn't speak, but glanced at Morien as if the small woman scared him. "I'm sorry, is this yours? I think you might've dropped it."

He glanced down at her hand, pushed between two of the youths, the wallet offered as an oblation to honesty. "Thank you," he said, barely acknowledging her, his voice hardly lifting above the rattle of the train. He took the wallet and his image disappeared behind the broad shoulders and unwashed odours of male youth.

Bastard, Striker thought, wondering why Morien had bothered, but her thoughts were interrupted as the train tilted her forward and she found herself trying to avoid squashing Morien altogether. "Sorry," she said.

"It's okay," Morien said. "I've spent too much of the morning with my face pressed into someone's armpit. At least you smell nice." Striker felt her stomach somersault at the compliment, and thanked whoever was listening for hospital showers. "I'm Morien Llewelyn, by the way."

Oh dear God. Striker had been reciting that name over and over and over until her blood was singing it, but the way it had resonated inside her sounded nothing like the words from Morien's own mouth. It was a honeyed siren call. It was a voice from all the stories and all the myths and all the histories she'd ever read. She knew that this was the voice that would call her for the rest of her life, and she had no choice but to follow.

And then she realised that her mouth was hanging open.

"I just thought you'd like to know who'd taken up residence in your armpit," Morien said.

That brought Striker out of her reverie and she grinned. "I'm Striker."

"Striker?" Oh yeah, roll those 'r's, baby!

"Yeah, Striker... Striker West."

"Striker?"

"Long story." And then, at last, the thrill of courage pushed her over the edge. "Look... are you in a hurry? I was just wondering, once we get off this cattle truck, we could go for a coffee or something?"

Chapter 3: Fiction weaving⁴

Okay, I can do this.

Striker knew she was visibly shaking as they emerged from the rainforest atmosphere of the Underground. The fresh air helped, and she took a few deep breaths, closing her mouth hurriedly as Morien looked up at her and smiled.

"I think there's a good place round the corner," she said, taking the lead, much to Striker's relief.

The street was crowded: a typical summer Saturday in London. Around them could be heard every accent from every corner of Britain, embellished with voices from further afield. No one thought twice about an American and a Welsh woman talking quietly together as they found a single empty table on the street in front of a café.

"Damn...," Morien said, as she glanced at the menu. "There's a minimum charge at this time of day. Are you hungry? We could have some lunch."

The thought of lunch made Striker's stomach rumble. She had last eaten about six hours before: half a chocolate bar.

But the thought of lunch with Morien... now that made her stomach lurch. The thought of drinking coffee with this woman was terrifying enough in itself.

And the panic was apparently obvious on her face. "It's okay," Morien said, half-rising from the chair, her voice low and understanding. "We can go somewhere else. Maybe just get something to drink and find somewhere...."

"No... no... lunch would be good...." Striker smiled, hoping she didn't look too scared. "If you'd like?"

Morien sat back down again, placing her bag under her seat. "That would be nice."

They ordered drinks. A simple mineral water for Morien. Striker wanted a beer. A good, strong, cold beer. Followed closely by a second. But decided that alcohol at this point might not give the right impression and stuck with a cola, while hoping she wasn't talking gibberish in the field of small talk.

The ice and the bubbles seemed to settle her a little. As did the forest warmth of her companion's eyes. She wanted to spend time with Morien. Hadn't that been her desire for months now?

Stop being such a fucking jerk and behave like a human being.

She sat back, feeling more comfortable, and breathed a little easier.

"So, where do you come from?" Morien asked.

"Originally? Philadelphia. You know, Liberty Bell, city of Brotherly Love...." Striker's voice trailed off, leaving a note in the air. It wasn't quite bitterness, but there was something, Morien thought: sadness, regret - disguised by a smile and a sip of cola. Morien half thought about commenting, but Striker swallowed and continued. "Lived in New York a while after that, then here."

Morien paused for a moment, digesting the information. "And you're obviously not here on holiday. Unless it's a busman's holiday."

"Not exactly. I...." Striker looked across the table, considering, aware that she'd already gone too far and Morien was expecting more. "I came over here to see my mother." *Kind of.*

"Oh, I see. And she lives here in London?"

"Yes." Another sip. "When I saw the job at Vinnie's I thought I'd apply. I like it here..." a new start, "...despite the weather."

Morien smiled. "How long have you been here now?"

"Almost a year." She could see Morien's forehead crease slightly in puzzlement, trying to work it out. She answered the question that was trying to be posed. "My mother's English. I have dual-nationality. I may sound like a Yank, but I hold a British passport as well, so I'm all good and legal." Her blue eyes twinkled over the rim of her glass, and her voice dropped to a stage whisper. "Don't tell the authorities, though, I still don't understand cricket. Gimme baseball any time."

Morien laughed, and Striker melted at the sound, grinning with the victory of eliciting that sweet music.

Their meals arrived, and they started them in silence: Morien neat and tidy with a salad and knife and fork, Striker with a bite that caused blue cheese and burger to slop onto her plate.

Smooth. She coloured slightly.

Morien smiled. She liked this woman. Extraordinary that she should be so drawn to someone she'd met barely an hour ago on a crowded station platform. She watched Striker's attempts at putting her burger back together, taking advantage of the American's diverted concentration.

She couldn't put her finger on it... but.... there was something about her that was familiar...

...and different...

...and reassuring...

...and....

Striker was interesting.

She had shucked off the leather jacket, and Morien absorbed the broad shoulders, the dark hair attempting to escape from its braid and cascade down her shoulders - Striker would push it back behind her ears when she was nervous, Morien had noticed. Her bare forearms were solid, strong-looking; her fingers, currently covered in a thin sheen of grease, seemed able but graceful at the same time. She seemed at once completely at home in this urban street, and at the same time as if she belonged to another time... another world.

Morien tried to imagine any other circumstances in which she would accept an invitation from a stranger, but couldn't. Then again she couldn't remember the last time she'd been invited anywhere, by anyone. At least, by anyone who wasn't a blood relative; who knew her and knew her circumstances. Maybe that was why she had accepted the spontaneous invitation: its rarity.

And the fact that this woman, if she worked at St Vincent's, understood.

And the possibility of... friendship.

Friendship had become scarce since....

Striker successfully reconstructed her burger and looked up to find Morien staring at her, her salad-laden fork halfway to her mouth. The Welsh woman blushed and sought cover with a mouthful of greenery, and Striker found beautiful attraction warming her like an internal stove.

She smiled dreamily, allowing a brief study of the faint rhythm of freckles on Morien's cheeks, then asked, "How about you?" Morien, her mouth still occupied by chicken and lettuce, frowned a little and Striker glorified in the little creases on her forehead. "I mean, what's a nice Welsh girl like you doing in a big scary place like London?"

Morien swallowed, and rested the fork on her plate. A little half-smile crept onto her face. "Sometimes I wonder," she said. Then the smile blossomed. "I came to university here, to study art. Then kept finding reasons to stay."

Striker nodded, fully understanding. "What do you do?" It was a question to which she knew the answer. Partly. She had followed Morien enough times to the council building, but the inner workings that swallowed her remained a mystery.

"I work for the regeneration unit at the East Metropolitan Borough Council."

Striker paused in her mouthful. Then said, a mystified twinkle in her eyes, "What the hell is a regeneration unit?"

Morien grinned, somehow liking Striker's reaction. Loving her attention. "It's all very worthy," she said. "It's the council's attempt to make their locality a nicer place in which to live. It's a given for any council, you would have thought, but not the way we do it. We go into housing estates, which have been run down since they were originally designed, and redevelop them. It might be something as basic as ensuring boarded-up windows are replaced, making sure that the streets are all properly lit, that people have adequate security in their homes and feel safe. It's acknowledging that tweaking or even reforming architectural design can make huge differences to the social environment and the community."

"And that's where your art training comes in?"

"It certainly helps." A little spark of pleasure ignited inside Morien: this stranger was taking an interest. In her life. In *her*. Her smile became still brighter. "We're working on an estate at the moment that has awful problems with drug crime and gang warfare. We haven't come close to finishing there yet, but already there's been a fall in reported crime there. We're just setting up a new community centre... you know, a simple meeting place for the community which encourages them to come together, discuss the problems that face them, or simply somewhere for them to go to have a cup of tea and a chat."

Striker smiled. "And it's incredible what a cup of tea and a chat can do."

Or a coffee. Or lunch.

Striker had listened to the speech, exalting in Morien's enthusiasm. Her eyes sparkled like sun on a river. She leaned forward on her seat, punctuating each point with a little bounce of excitement. And Striker was transfixed. This was the woman she'd fallen in love with. This was the woman she'd fantasized about day and night for months. But this woman - this living, breathing, beautiful, passionate, caring woman, whose lyrical voice made her glad she was sitting, because she knew her knees would give way - was better than she'd ever dreamed possible.

And she fell in love all over again.

Trying to calm her own ardour, she said, quietly, "The nice Welsh girl comes to the big, scary city to chase the monsters away."

Morien looked up from spearing her salad, a little startled by Striker's choice of words. Startled

but charmed. She regarded her, a half smile and her head slightly to one side. This woman wasn't making fun of her, either. There was understanding in those amazingly blue eyes. And admiration. Again she felt that thrill. "Something like that," she finally said, around a slice of cucumber.

"And what do you do, in this process?" Striker asked.

Morien shrugged. "Fact is, I'm just a drone. I help organise and carry out other people's ideas."

"You're not a drone." Striker blinked. Avoided Morien's glance by picking a tomato slice from her otherwise neglected garnish. "At least, you don't strike me as a drone. Aren't you allowed to have your own ideas?"

"Oh, yes. We're encouraged to put forward our proposals."

"And?" White teeth bit into the tomato's red skin.

"Sorry?" Morien asked, suddenly entranced.

"What happens with your proposals?"

Morien shrugged. "They generally get rejected."

"Spoken like a woman who's been there, done that...."

"And the t-shirt's being printed as we speak." They both chuckled and ate for a moment in silence.

"I'd like to know..." Striker finally said, wiping her mouth. "What was your proposal?"

Morien glanced up. Was the question genuine or was she being polite?

"There's some derelict buildings in the south of the borough on a road called Tumblety Street...."

Recognition crept through Striker's mind like an old London fog. A mention in the darkest of places, amongst the hurried explanations of medics and police. It had been the only place with which Morien had been connected.

"Isn't that where you were... found?"

She saw a deep forest green pain bend in the Welsh woman's eyes. Morien nodded. Looked down. Covered her hurt with a sip of water.

"So these derelict buildings...?"

The relief and gratitude that washed across the table were tangible. Another sip, more confident,

and the glass went down.

"There's houses in the area, many of which aren't even habitable, some of which are used as squats. A few are still legally lived in, but it's a grim neighbourhood."

"There's a few grim neighbourhoods in east London. Why there?"

Morien liked this woman.

"The street's all boarded-up houses on one side and neglected warehouses on the other. The architecture's wonderful though: classic Victorian... worth looking after just for that, and there's so much residential potential there."

"But?"

This woman was bright.

Morien smiled. She almost seemed sheepish. "There's a chapel in the middle of it...."

"A chapel?" *Hey, relax, she ain't no Bible-basher. You watched her on plenty of Sundays. She never went near a church.*

"It's so strange. There's all this dark, heavy-looking Victorian architecture and in the middle of it all is this tiny Welsh-style chapel. At the very least it was designed by someone who knew the architectural style that's famous in North Wales."

"A taste of home, huh?"

Morien nodded. "It's as if it's being starved of light. Do you know what I mean?"

Striker understood totally. Starved of light, starved of love... neglected.... "Yet your proposal was rejected."

"For the time being." Morien pushed her plate away, determinedly, her salad finished.

"You live in hope?"

"Always." She smiled. "In the meantime, it's all Woodhall Estate. There seems to be a lot staked on this project. A lot of reputations are on the line. A lot of political careers could be at risk...."

"The drones do all the work and the politicians get the payoff."

Morien lifted an eyebrow and Striker melted.

They ordered dessert and talked of the weather until it arrived.

"Do you know Wales at all?" Morien asked, plunging a spoon into raspberry frozen yoghurt.

"Only what I've read."

"And what have you read?"

"Dragons, King Arthur and burning cottages."

Morien chuckled. "Yes, that's about right." She licked yoghurt off her spoon. Striker suddenly felt her entire body flame at the sight of her pink tongue flicking over the soft, wet mess of ice. Her skin buzzed, her mind was full of humming... until she realised Morien was asking her a question.

"Sorry?"

"Are you all right?"

"Yeah, yeah, just a little warm, that's all."

"We could move."

"No, this is good."

"Yes, it is, isn't it?" And Morien was surprised just how much she was enjoying herself. When she'd first accepted Striker's invitation, she'd suddenly felt a glimmer of fear. For all their dull familiarity, there was safety in family. Strangers meant rejection and potential danger.

But this woman... this woman knew her background but had not dwelt on it, instead seeming genuinely interested in what she had to say. This woman had been suddenly so scared by the prospect of a cup of coffee, let alone a meal, and it had felt amazing to be able to take charge for once.

It had been a long time.

She smiled into the beautiful blue eyes. "It's been a long time since I've done anything like this," she admitted.

"Not too many crazy Americans propositioning you, huh?"

"Not too many, no." She watched Striker scrape chocolate gateau off her plate and relish the taste. She imagined it sweet in her mouth. "How about you?" she asked, surprised at how interested she was in the answer. "All that healing the sick..." Striker snorted into her chocolate. "...you can't have had the time to meet many people."

"Not too many, no," the American smiled. "But... I met someone early on and he's helped with that. I live with him now."

Morien noted the softening of Striker's face as she talked about this man. She noted that her eyes changed to a sea blue with the mention of him, and were fixed tenderly on the disappearing chocolate gateau.

And she noted that somewhere deep, deep inside herself, there was the tiniest, nonsensical, inexplicable... disappointment.

"What does he do?" she asked, politely.

Striker grinned. "Lives off me. He calls himself a musician. The government calls him unemployed. There's a lot of people who call him the best damn DJ south of the river. Take your pick."

"And what do you call him?"

"Danny." She pushed her plate away, and pulled the battered cigarette packet from her jacket. "Oh," she said, almost as an afterthought, "do you mind if I smoke?"

Morien made a face. "Well I guess we're outside. I'm surprised you smoke though."

"Why?" Striker gratefully placed the cigarette in her mouth and lighting it in the shelter of her hands.

"Considering what you do for a living."

Striker lifted an eyebrow. "Do you know how many doctors smoke?"

Morien opened her mouth to speak and then said, a twinkle in her eye, "I probably don't want to know."

Striker grinned and shook her head, and Morien watched, strangely fascinated, as smoke trickled between her lips. Her eyes narrowed. They had been skirting round the subject, both were aware. But after a pause in the conversation Morien asked, "How did you know me at St Vincent's?"

"What do you mean?" Striker immediately felt on her guard.

"I don't remember seeing you there. I remember the consultants: Mr Mistry and Mr Haywood, and lots of the nurses, and the man that brought dinner round." Striker grimaced. "But I don't remember you."

"I'm based in A&E."

"You were there when I was first admitted?"

Striker nodded.

"God... you probably saved my life."

"No... I..."

"Hang on... I remember my brother saying... when he first came in, it was an American in Accident and Emergency that showed him up to Intensive Care."

"Well, I..."

"Drake wanted to thank you."

Striker smiled. "He was scaring the receptionist, I had to do something."

"He can get a little intense."

"He was scared for his sister, I can understand that."

There was another pause. Morien drew circles with her spoon in the last puddle of frozen yoghurt.

"What happens when you're in a coma?" she asked suddenly.

"Well, it's like the brain closing down...." Striker said.

"No, I mean, hospital procedure." Striker watched Morien's face. She was still concentrating on the patterns in her yoghurt, creating dunes like sea's edge in the pink substance. But then she looked up catching Striker's gaze, and their eyes locked. Morien held her breath. "I remember...." she said.

"Have you finished?" the waitress said.

"Yes, I think so. Thank you," Morien broke the connection and smiled at the waitress.

"Would you like anything else?"

Morien looked at Striker again, and Striker paused. There were so many ways to answer that. "No," she said, "I'm fine. Thanks."

Striker paid for the meal, despite Morien's protestations. Guilt appeasement, Striker knew. Then they stood, a little awkwardly, wondering what was supposed to happen next.

"Thank you," Morien said, "for everything."

"Don't thank me," Striker said. She was suddenly aware of how very tired she was, and despite the yearning to spend more time with Morien, her entire body felt heavy with food and

exhaustion. "Look, I suppose I'd better get going. I ought to get some sleep at some stage."

Morien looked startled at the comment but then said, "Don't tell me you were working last night?" Striker nodded. "I'm so sorry, you must be exhausted. Please, don't let me keep you. And thank you again."

"No I'm fine, really," but Morien was already turning to go. Moving away. Striker wanted to go after her, to grab her arm - to kiss her goodbye - but the heaviness in her limbs rooted her to the pavement.

Morien took a few steps, was almost at the corner. She could see the nearest entrance to the Underground only a few heartbeats away. And then she looked back, and caught a glimpse of Striker between the crowds, still standing where she'd left her. She made a decision and reached into her bag.

Striker felt numb as she watched the scarfed head disappear among the throngs of passers-by. She felt bereft. And then suddenly, she felt a hand in her own, and a voice reaching up to her ear. "I'm going," Morien said, "I promise, but I just wanted to say how much I enjoyed lunch." And she was gone again, disappeared elf-like into the forest of people.

Striker opened her hand and unfolded the little slip of paper. A phone number.

Her fucking phone number. YES!

Chapter 4: A walk in someone else's skin⁵

A phone number. *Her fucking phone number.*

Like she was going to be able to sleep now.

What the hell have I done?

It was starting. The horror was coming. Her fingers were itching. She'd already memorised the number. She'd memorised it weeks ago, after she'd first extracted it from the hospital computer, but she still stared at the piece of paper in front of her. In Morien's neat, flourishing handwriting: her phone number.

So what was she supposed to do now?

The itching in her fingers told her. The buzzing in her head told her. The pounding in her heart told her. PHONE HER.

But Striker knew that if her fingers made that path across the phone, she wouldn't be able to stop

the return journey again and again and again.

It had happened too often before. There had been that misunderstanding with Jeff that time. There was that thing at NYU: that nastiness with Tammy. Tammy should never have got the police involved. She had only wanted to reassure herself that Tammy was still at the other end of the phone those times. But nothing had come of it.

She had never, ever meant to scare anyone.

Yeah, right.

Who the fuck are you kidding? You had every intention of scaring the shit out of them. When Tammy had called the police Striker had been devastated by what she saw as betrayal. And she'd wanted to beat Tammy's sweet, pretty face in. She'd wanted Tammy to live with the scars of betraying Striker West for the rest of her life.

Jesus Christ... she'd come so close.

Yes, she'd meant to scare people.

But she had scared herself more.

So when she got to England she kept her distance. Some... a lot... of careful one night stands, but nothing serious. Just sex. She didn't get close to anyone... at least to anyone available. Well, there was Danny who was very available. But he was available to everyone - everyone female - and didn't commit to anyone or anything. And Kishen was safely married, and theirs was an acquaintance confined within the hospital walls.

And she didn't want to scare Morien. She was terrified of repeating what had happened back there.

She could have phoned Morien before, just to hear her voice before she replaced the receiver. No harm in that. But she hadn't, she'd managed to stop herself. And she couldn't now.

Except she had no choice, because Morien sure as hell didn't have her number.

She took a swig of beer.

And what did it mean? This piece of paper suggested Morien wanted to be friends. Did she want more than that?

And that's all it took for images to come swarming into her head. Naked flesh, sweat-slicked bodies, a gentle breeze lifting the ends of Morien's auburn hair, the sunset turning her skin golden.

It had been two hours and forty five minutes since they'd said goodbye.

Striker thought of the moment she'd seen her pushing her way down the platform. After she'd quashed the thought of running, she'd almost fallen to her knees, simultaneously cursing and blessing heaven. Instead, she'd stared at her boots.

What had been the chances of Morien recognising her?

Fucking Fate.

Striker took another swig of beer.

So, they'd met. And Morien had been sweet and charming and great company and beautiful and Striker was so in love with her she couldn't think straight. Which was the problem. Was Morien interested? She didn't know which she feared more right now: rejection or open-armed acceptance.

The door opened and a fresh packet of cigarettes landed in her lap. Less one. "You could have bought your own," she said, as Danny wandered in front of the television, a lit cigarette dangling from his fingers.

"I could, but this way we both cut down," he replied. "You making some kind of style statement?" he added pointing towards the fresh-cut daisies that now graced the coffee table.

Striker had bought them on the way home at a stall just outside her local station. Now they stood in a large jug - she couldn't find a vase - as a constant reminder. She ignored Danny's question, knowing that he didn't really expect an answer.

"What you watching?" he said, parking himself on the couch next to her. His long legs stretched onto the coffee table, vying for space with the clutter of magazines, last night's pizza box, the jug of flowers and Striker's own feet.

Striker glanced at the television. She had automatically flicked on the box when she'd sat down, but hadn't looked at it since. It had been white noise behind the clamour in her head. Now she saw that two men were discussing baseball. Thank God for cable.

"Replay of the Phillies-Mets game."

"Roll on the new footy season."

"Soccer's a wuss's game."

"Only because Americans play it like wusses."

This is why she liked Danny. They could get lost in meaningless, good-natured arguments and there would never be any comeback or bad feeling.

Most of the time.

"How much have you drunk?" he asked suddenly.

Hiding under Striker's legs was a six-pack. Half a six-pack.

"You can count, can't you?"

"Give us one, then." Striker bent down and threw him a can. "Shit day?"

Striker smiled. "Would you believe, no?" Although she was beginning to feel cold and hot at the same time.

"With you I'd believe anything, sis." Danny opened the can, lager sloshing over his t-shirt. He shrugged and took a long drink. "So why aren't you yelling at me to shut the fuck up cos you've been working all night and you're trying to sleep?"

"Cos I'm watching TV."

"What's the score?"

"What?"

"You heard."

"Bastard."

"So, what's going on, Strike?"

Striker let her head fall back onto the couch. Her stomach was beginning to lurch with panic. "I think I've met someone."

Danny looked at her. "Male, female or somewhere in between?"

"You always have to bring that one up, don't you?"

"Diane?"

"Bastard. Besides everybody's slept with Diane."

"So?"

"Female."

"She like you?"

"Fuck knows." Striker broke out into a cold sweat. Her hand was shaking round the beer can.

"What's the situation?"

"I had lunch with her today."

"And?"

"She gave me her phone number."

"And?"

"I have no idea." Striker threw herself across the room and dived into the bathroom. Danny could hear her retching and followed her. Pulling on the light, he reached out to hold back her hair as she knelt over the toilet bowl.

Striker breathed heavily, the pungent smell of bile bouncing off the porcelain, the residue of her burger taunting her.

She had wanted to repeat lunch, but not quite like this.

Slowly, she straightened, then crawled up to the basin and rinsed her face and mouth, slumping backwards against the bath.

"Was that the lunch, the beer, or are you coming down with something?" Danny asked as he flushed.

"None of them. That's me being a complete fuck-up."

She looked up into the dark, concerned eyes of her friend. Her face was still wet, her hair sticking to her skin. "I'm scared, Dan. I really like this woman. I think I love this woman. She's beautiful, you know, really beautiful. But I'm scared."

"Why's my big, bad sister scared?" His eyes smiled, but they weren't mocking.

Striker leant back on the bath again, her eyes closing. "Why the hell would anybody want to be with me?"

She could hear Danny bending his large body in the small bathroom. She could feel his presence in front of her. She felt his big hands cup her cheeks. She opened her eyes to his. "Hey, sis," he said, "the reason anybody would want to be with you is that you're a good person and a great friend."

"You're only saying that cos I pay the phone bill," Striker said.

"Nah, cos you pay the phone bill and you've got a great body," Danny countered, giving her a

peck on the lips. "That and you scare the shit out of the landlord when the rent's late."

Striker smiled. "God, I'm tired. I could sleep for a year."

"Com'on, sis, let's get you into bed." He took her hand and pulled her up. "You know," he said, as he switched the light off, "this bathroom ain't big enough for the two of us."

* * * * *

She had been lying on the sofa for some time now, half-dozing. Half-dreaming.

She felt so tired nowadays.

People moved in front of her. Some black and white oldie flickered on the TV set. Boy meets girl. Boy falls in love with girl. Some problem ensues that might be *Romeo and Juliet* or *Much Ado About Nothing* but ultimately they walk into the sunset together and the TV audience collectively give a deep, contented sigh and go and make a cup of tea.

But for some time, these black and white figures had become lost somewhere in a lazy Saturday afternoon dreamworld of chapels and pending trays and crazy Americans.

She had been breathing slowly and evenly for some time now, but unaware of the slow in... slow out, as she concentrated on Striker's voice.

Her mind had her sitting across from her. She had talked to her in that low, confident, reassuring tone. She had simply talked about London, America, St Vincent's and Morien had imagined her there, sitting on the floor, her back against the armchair, a cigarette in her hand. She had imagined the little quirk of her smile and the light in her eyes.

She had been painting when a wave of dizziness washed over her and she'd had to lie down. Things like that frightened her nowadays. And for a moment, Morien had wondered about phoning someone - but lying there, running through her options, she realised she didn't want someone to fuss over her: to worry, to panic. Drake would have fussed. Anyone else would have panicked. She had thought about calling her father, just to hear his voice. She was supposed to call downstairs to Mrs Kantorowicz.

Instead she'd lain there quietly for almost an hour thinking about her family, her life, her work, Sophie, friends... and Striker. More and more, despite herself, her mind had been lured back to the tall American. Mental chocolate.

She'd known her for less than a day, but somehow Morien knew that, if Striker had been there, she would have sat her down and talked her through her fears.

But then, she's a doctor, isn't she?

Now she could hear her own breathing, the slow in and out. And then, just behind it, her heartbeat no longer hammering as it had been.

The slight breeze rattled the open window. There was a blackbird singing outside. Mrs Kantorowicz was playing the piano, her old, passionate fingers creating an impromptu duet with the birdsong. A car passed. Little gusts of air brought a burst of muted conversation into the room.

"...Uncle Gil says... got to go back to"

"...about here...?"

"...coming out.... check back tomorr...."

A car door slammed and an engine started. The car moved off down the road.

Morien wished the phone would ring.

* * * * *

She had slept for six hours.

When she woke up she found herself drooling onto an open page of *Idylls of the King*. Fuck. She hurriedly swiped at the damp paper with the duvet and carefully placed the book down by the bed.

She was feeling a little better. Her sleep had been undisturbed and deep, although she had dreamed. She felt an echo of it in her mind, like the sound of a distant conversation - but she couldn't catch the details. And then it was gone as if a door had shut.

Striker sat up. The flat was quiet. Danny was definitely out. There'd be music pounding through the walls if he was in. She was sorry, she would have liked to have spent the evening with him - found something crappy to watch on TV, got Indian food, enjoyed a couple of beers and annoyed the neighbours. She felt too alive to sleep. She felt like she had caffeine flowing through her veins and it was bubbling the name Morien.

Heaven help me, I'm in love.

She bounced out of bed, making her way into the sitting room to find a note scrawled over the discarded pizza box.

Gone to the Boom. See you there?

Yeah, the Boom. Maybe that's what she needed: to get out and about, talk to people, watch Dan. In what seemed a matter of minutes she dived into the shower, dressed and was out, her hair still damp at the roots.

* * * * *

Morien woke with a start to the sound of sirens.

She blinked with some bemusement at the collage of flashing lights on the television screen. It had been dark where she had been, and damp and frightening.

Her head ached and she eased herself up, feeling the weight of her body in her arms. All she wanted to do was sleep. She closed the curtains, switched the television off and was about to make her way to bed when she felt her eye drawn to the canvas she'd been playing with earlier. The clutter of images. Splashes of red and blue oil paint mirrored what had been on the television screen, fading darker and darker into the grimy brickwork of Tumblety Street. The painting scared her, and she would wonder why she'd started it.

Therapy, she thought with a mordant chuckle.

She had had comments recently, albeit well-meaning, of just how dark her work was becoming. "Damn, Mo," her brother would say in one of his less diplomatic moments, "I'm glad I'm not in your head."

"And I wish I wasn't, Drake," Morien said aloud. She didn't want to finish the painting... she didn't want to arrive at that same conclusion, as if finishing would mean hospital and loss.

But....

Her mind immediately leapt to blue eyes and the way the sun had freed colours from long, brunette hair.

And she so wanted not to be in the dark any more.

With a burst of determination, Morien took the canvas down, replacing it with a blank one, and picked up a charcoal pencil.

* * * * *

The noise from The Boom Shack reverberated down the street, rattling the windows and causing passers-by to catch the beat and tap their shoes on the pavement. Above, clouds moved in the darkening sky, swinging across the moon which was bright as it rose. Its light joined the streetlamps and followed the rhythm. It seemed for just a moment that the whole world was dancing.

Patrons were drawn to The Boom Shack by sound, not by sight. It was found in a small, unremarkable pedestrian mews off a busy street lined with shops - now carefully locked and barred for the night - and restaurants and pubs heaving with their own noise and customers. But each rhythm bowed to the Boom.

And the night had barely started.

Striker slipped into the alley and found the single pulsing neon light above the door. Some letters had gone out, so the light throbbled OOM SHA OOM SHA into the night.

She could tell there was a bouncer at the door from the glow of his smoke. It didn't smell legal. "Hey, Thomas," she said. "You got no Pully, tonight?"

He appeared like the Cheshire Cat above her, teeth first, followed by six foot ten inches of West Indies male. "Nah, Pully's just taking a leak before we get busy. I'm looking after his ganja for him."

"Course you are." She took the joint from his lips and put it between her own. "The Man in there?" she asked and inhaled.

"Yeah, Dan's in there, Strike," Thomas said. "Get in there quick, or he'll take all the nice bodies."

"I'm not after bodies tonight, Thomas. Just here to watch." She reached up and put the joint back in his mouth.

"If you change your mind, sis..."

"Don't tempt me, bro...." she said with a wink, and walked through the club doors and into a wall of sound.

The Boom Shack was by no means full, and wouldn't be for a while longer: not until the pubs had been drunk dry and the restaurants had closed. But already the dance floor was in use, the twisting and gyrating of glistening bodies obvious in the opaque, half-light. Below the smell of tobacco and alcohol, below the smell of heat and sweat, and below the all-invasive electric sense of dub music, already the smell of raw sex was lingering.

And in the gloom, Striker made out the shape of Danny, a girl on either side of him, a blonde and an Asian, his arms draped over both, hearing sweet nothings in gentle stereo. She made her way over and as he looked up his mouth broke into an even bigger grin.

"Hey, my big sis is here," he said. He unhooked an arm from the blonde, drew Striker's chin forward and touched his lips to her own. "You feeling better?" he said in the sotto voce tone that she could feel rather than hear above the beat.

She nodded and smiled. "Wanna come play?" he asked more loudly, slipping his arm back around the second girl.

"Nah, I'm just here for you, my friend. You on tonight?"

"Midnight, sis, stick around," Danny replied, with a wink and a grin, and had his attention drawn away by a wandering Asian tongue.

Tonight was going to be Danny's night. Obviously.

But that was okay, Striker figured. It had been her day today. Her mind wandered yet again to Morien, as her feet took her for a drink. She ordered a beer and sat back against the bar, regarding the swaggering DJ on stage and the filling dance floor.

Strange though, that in these dark, warm surroundings, all she could feel was the way the sun had felt on her face as she sat with Morien in the street café, and the way it had emphasised the little cluster of freckles on Morien's cheek. Her imagination traced the curve of Morien's smile.

* * * * *

Morien found herself smoothing a finger over a cheekbone, softening it. The lips were too hard as well. She traced a thumb over them, then snatched a charcoal pencil and started playing again.

She thought of her sitting across the table, then sun shining on her face, but she couldn't help but see her in darkness: her brunette hair fading into black, the planes of her face emphasised by shadow. On the canvas her eyes were dark. Strange considering how light they were, how they shone like a summer sky inside her.

But was the darkness coming from herself or Striker?

Morien had been sketching for over an hour - planning how to paint Striker's face, the colours she could use. Behind her now was the vague representation of a wheel - a cord pulled down from it, away from it, connecting the wheel to a bobbin... *How could anyone prick their finger on a spinning wheel?* she had thought as she sketched.

* * * * *

Striker put a cigarette to her mouth and found a lighter in front of her. "I'll get that," said a deep, sweet voice.

"Thank you."

"My name's Patrick," he said, settling down on the bar stool next to her.

"Thank you, Patrick."

"What's your name?"

Striker smiled and let the smoke drift out of her mouth. She turned to look at him and found hazel eyes staring back at her. He was cute: tall, with an ruffle of red hair, and dressed a little like herself - casual, the 'I don't give shit' look.

But there was an air of innocence about him that Striker liked. He reminded her of a young teenager out on the pull for the first time. He reminded her of... Morien's brother. And there again was the image of Morien in her head eclipsing everything and everyone else. A month ago... a week ago... last night... she might have welcomed Patrick's advances, danced with him, played with him, taken him home. The thought now left her cold. It would be like sleeping with her brother, if she'd had one. It would be like sleeping with Morien's brother.

"Patrick..." she started, smiling gently into his hopeful eyes, ".I have to tell you, I'm with someone else."

"Oh."

Shit. Now she felt like she'd kicked a puppy.

"He's a lucky man," he said, trying to salvage a degree of sophistication.

"Woman," she said, and found herself enjoying the expressions vying for attention on his face.

* * * * *

Once upon a time....

Sophie had always tried to define Morien's painting style, and to Morien's secret delight, she never could. Now, she stood back and wondered what Sophie would make of this. Morien wasn't sure what Morien made of it. She looked at the script at the bottom of the canvas. She would paint over that, of course, highlight it in a different colour, smarten the calligraphy.

Once upon a time there was a princess and a princess...

* * * * *

Sisters and brothers, please welcome to the Boom Shack the Banton of the Beat, the Master of Dub, our own Grindsman of the Tables... Danny Giboyeaux.

The white noise of music started to seem familiar. Striker looked up and saw Danny on stage. His music was eclectic - he fused dub with hip hop, r&b, jazz, big beat, there was a recent interest in bhangra, even classical themes that he could sample and re-sample - any sound that caught his ear. There was no posturing with Danny, no hyped-up cool image. The fusion gelled with his passion and enthusiasm and that was infectious. The crowd had bayed at his appearance.

As Danny launched himself into an anthemic floor-filler, Striker imagined taking Morien onto the dance floor: feeling her body pressed close. She could imagine the sway of her hips under her hands, the smell of her skin. She tore her gaze from the dancers and turned back to the bar.

"You okay, Strike? You're looking a little peaky," the barman asked.

"Fine, just need a drink"

* * * * *

She was rocking on her feet, so tired her eyes stung. It was fully dark outside now, and quiet in the street outside, with just the hum of distant traffic to show she was not completely alone in the world.

The phone had rung earlier, but she'd let the machine pick it up, glad for it when she heard her brother's voice. Except he'd worry when she didn't answer. She sighed. She'd call him in the morning.

She wanted a little peace this evening. She wanted to be alone with her thoughts and her creation.

Her new friend. Painting or person? The two were beginning to merge in her tired mind, and she found herself talking to the woman in front of her. Little things. Hopes and fears. Concerns. Items she needed to put on her shopping list.

This painted Striker remained quiet but interested. Listening, constantly listening to her... listening out for something. As if she was waiting for something to happen.

* * * * *

Striker watched as two men danced across the floor together, almost colliding with a man and woman, who were so bound up in each other they barely noticed.

That's what she liked about the Boom Shack: it accepted everyone, whether black, white, straight, gay, fuckup, loser.... She ordered another beer.

And what the fuck would Morien be doing in a place like this, anyway? She tried to picture Morien in her flowered clothes standing, let alone moving, on the packed dance floor. She was a creature of light, who didn't... couldn't... belong to this world.

However good the beer was.

* * * * *

It was time for bed, but Morien found herself back on the sofa, too tired even to lie down. Just sitting.

She could be proud of herself... she'd remembered to take her pills.

She had covered the picture for the time being. The charcoal-shaded gaze had suddenly become too much. But when she closed her eyes she saw blue.

She liked that. It was soothing. It was a friendly, peaceful colour.

She hoped...

...she hoped Striker would call tomorrow.

* * * * *

"I'll fucking skin you like an animal, you black bastard."

Where the hell had that come from?

No one else had noticed. Danny had moved on to one of his known crowd-pleasers: an anthemic sampling of his grandmother's church choir with jazz and dub, and the throng were caught up in its feelgood rhythm. Striker had heard the abuse purely by chance. Through the wash of sliding bodies, she saw the shadows of men in the entrance and the glint of steel pulsing under the neon light.

She began to push her way through the curtain of people, pushing aside flesh as if it was gauze.

From this distance she could see the scene through the deserted outer lobby: there were men, white men with big boots and skinheads. Their faces were so pale it was as if the gaudy light slid off their skin without leaving a trace. But Striker could see the colour reflected in the polished knife blade that seemed almost suspended in front of Thomas.

The man holding it wore a long, black coat and a sneer. His eyes seemed locked with Thomas's, as if there was nothing in the world other than their battle of wills and the blade. Behind them, his three companions held back Pully's short, wiry form, his usually pale skin flushed pink with anger and fear.

They couldn't see Striker, and Striker knew it. She put her head down and charged, as if aiming for a quintain. The skinhead crashed against the opposite wall of the mews, Striker's full weight crushing him to the brickwork. She heard the clink of metal as the knife fell from his hand, and was hazily aware of a large shape moving to pick it up.

But her concentration was solely on the nasty, pasty-faced individual who was currently quivering under her hands. She gripped his coat collar and hoisted him against the wall. With wry amusement, she noticed she was taller than him.

"Go fight with someone your own size, shithead, or you'll get hurt."

Somehow the man squeezed out the words: "I don't fight girls."

Striker chuckled. "That's true. You can't do much fighting now, can you?" She emphasised her argument by banging his head backwards on the alley wall.

She saw the helpless rage in his eyes as his mouth exploded with "Fucking dyke!" and a gob of saliva landed on her face.

Striker glared at him, banging his head back again and again to emphasise her words. "I am... not... a fucking... dyke!" She continued to hold his gaze as she kneed him in the groin. His knees buckled. "I'm all woman, asshole, though it seems I've got more between my legs than you have."

"That's not fair," he gasped.

"Fair?" Striker laughed in his face. "Threatening an unarmed man with a knife is fair? This is fair. This is skin to skin, man." She let go of him and to his credit, he stayed on his feet, albeit with a bent gait and knock knees. "Okay," she continued, "go on. Let's make this 'fair'. Take a shot at me."

And he did.

He punched her, remarkably hard, and she reeled back with her chest smarting, but her leathers protected her from the worst of the hit, and his sneer had barely had time to redevelop before her own fist smashed into his face. This time he hit the ground, spattering blood and teeth.

Striker looked at his prone form, where he seemed unsure of whether to nurse his broken mouth or battered groin. She was so tempted to kick him in the stomach that her foot tingled in its boot. But no.

Noblesse oblige.

She turned round and was stunned and rather amused by the scene that confronted her. The knife was again suspended in air, but this time it was held by Pully, who'd shaken himself free of the skinheads' grasp at Striker's diversion. Thomas meanwhile, held two of the skinheads under his oak-tree arms, in what looked like a death-grip.

Striker looked at the skinheads. "You want some of that?"

"Look, we don't want no trouble, right?" one of them said, eyeing the knife.

"Bit late for that, isn't it?" Pully said. "Go on, fuck off... or we'll set She-Woman on you."

"And take your no-dick friend with you," Striker added.

Torn between machismo and fear, for a moment their waxen faces looked strangely stretched. Then struggling free from Thomas's grasp and heaving their fallen leader up, they left. Discretion, it appeared, really was the better part of valour.

Striker looked at the two of them. "You know," she said, "if it ever gets out that the security here is in the hands of a giant teddy bear and his white mini-me, this club is fucked."

"Fucked already, Strike," Pully said. "Those guys'll be back."

There was no sign of Pully's usual carefree attitude. He was not joking.

"What do you mean?" Striker asked.

"They been here before, sis," Thomas picked up. "They work for some dogheart mafia guy who's moved into town. They've been hackling a lot of the clubs round here. Some boss man came and tried to deal with Ray and Fabio. Wanted one of his dealers to be based at the Boom, selling hard junk to the brothers and sisters, you know?"

"Course they refused," Pully continued. "You know what Ray and Fabio are like about drugs." He pulled out a joint and Striker lifted an eyebrow. "Yeah, well, you know, sis. A little recreational ganja is different. I'm discreet."

Striker snorted.

"Not the hard stuff, though, sis," Thomas said. "Ray and Fabio. They're uphill guys, everything legal, you know? They threatened to call the police on this dog, and these guys been trying it on

ever since."

"We've caught them inside before now, trying to sell. Me and Thomas, or the boss men, or one of the others, we always chucked 'em out." Pully lit his joint. "But they're comin' back in groups, now."

"Ray and Fabio, they don't want to bring the feds in, you know?" Thomas said, shaking his head. "But they're gonna have to do something, sis. Have to soon."

Pully offered Striker the joint. "Thanks for tonight, Strike," he said.

She took a long drag. "Any time, you know that."

Thomas slapped her on the shoulder. "We'll always be all right when you're around," he smiled that Cheshire cat smile. "Drinks on us tonight, okay?"

Yeah, and what about when I'm not around?

Striker went to get drunk.

* * * * *

She liked Easthouses Terrace. It was leafy, neat. It looked polite, even in a London East End night. It was lined with elegant Victorian houses, mostly apartment conversions she assumed. She wondered what it would be like to live here, instead of a 1970s concrete hellhole. She wondered what it would be like to live here with Morien.

Striker plumped down onto the pavement, her boots in the gutter. It was good spot: not directly opposite, but not too far down, hidden by a verdant horse chestnut tree, that seemed to be growing out of the paving stones. From here she could see the windows of Morien's flat. There was light coming from one. She glanced at her watch: 2:27 a.m. Why was Morien awake at 2:27 a.m.?

Half of her wanted to go and find out if anything was wrong.

The other half of her found that she couldn't get up.

So she lit a cigarette instead. At least, she tried to light a cigarette, but she didn't seem able to marry the lighter flame with the end of the little stick. Somehow, in the end, with a deft feint, there was a satisfying hiss of ignited lighter fluid and a comforting flush appeared. Striker inhaled and felt the joy of her throat burning.

She leant against the tree, trying to focus her eyes on the other glow at the window.

Hey, Morien, she thought, if you need anything, I'm right here. She smiled to herself. "Morien, Morien, let down your auburn hair."

And she felt her eyes closing.

* * * * *

There was a sharp pain in her shoulder.

She steadied her sword and faced the Dark Knight in front of her. He was saying something she didn't understand. She heard herself saying "I have vowed to protect her, give her to me."

"Hey, homeless person, you have to move," the Dark Knight said and again there was a sharp pain in her shoulder.

Striker opened her eyes a crack and was blinded by the face of the old lady who was busy jabbing her with a long, sharp finger.

"Wah?" she said.

"You not stay here. You go or I telephone police." Polis. She had a heavy eastern European accent.

Striker was finding her bearings in the glaring light of Sunday morning. She was still slumped against the tree on Morien's road, her feet in the gutter. A small, chattering group of people were gathering.

The old woman poked her again.

"Hey, stop doing that," she said, wincing at the noise of her own voice echoing around her head.

"You go away, homeless person."

"I'm not..." she stopped herself from swearing "...homeless."

"Then what you doing here? Go home."

Striker got to her feet, reeling slightly as her knees almost gave out. "All right, all right...."

"You pisshead?" the old woman said.

Striker blinked at her. "Yeah," she said. "I'm a pisshead." She glanced at the gaggle of residents all looking at her as if she was something they'd scraped off a collective shoe.

The analogy was a good one. That was exactly how she felt.

She shouldn't be here. She wanted to get out of here before Morien saw her. She took a quick look down the street. There was no sign of life at the windows of her apartment. Then a movement at the corner of her eye: a moving figure coming down from the other end of the street, a Sunday newspaper under her arm.

Oh, fuck! Oh fuck oh fuck oh fuck!

As the look of recognition settled on Morien's approaching face, Striker suddenly felt very sick indeed. She couldn't look her in the face. She settled on her feet instead. She was wearing sandals, sensible, comfortable-looking blue sandals. She had cute toes.

"Striker?"

"Hi."

"You know this person?" the old lady said.

"Um... yes, Mrs Kantorowicz, she's a friend of mine." She took Striker by the arm and guided her towards home.

"Are you okay?" she asked, keeping her voice down.

"Kind of." Striker looked round. Mrs Kantorowicz was following them, at a safe distance.

"You've got blood on your hand!" Morien paused for a moment. "Are you hurt?" The concern in her eyes made Striker feel even more ashamed.

She glanced down at the stains on her knuckles. "No, no, I was just helping... someone...." She trailed off, unsure of what to say.

"What are you doing here?" Morien looked up at Striker as she reached the front door of the house.

"I was just... in the neighbourhood."

"Oh." She unlocked the door and hustled Striker up two flights of stairs. Striker was aware of the door opening again behind them. She sensed rather than saw Mrs Kantorowicz in the hallway below.

Morien opened her own front door then pushed Striker into her flat.

Striker stood there, taking in her surroundings.

Morien's flat was neat, cosy and filled with Morien. It was small, with the bedroom and kitchen

separated from the main room merely by partition walls. Only the bathroom betrayed its presence by its closed door. It was plainly decorated, white walls adorned with a few colourful, fine art posters; a houseplant dotted here and there; photographs; a glimpse at the double bed showed a clean white coverlet embroidered with roses. Very Morien. And then there were books and books and books on shelves, piled carefully on the floor, on tables, on desks. An easel stood to one side, the canvas it supported covered with a long cloth.

"You have a lovely home," Striker said.

"Thank you. I'm sorry about Mrs Kantorowicz, she can be a little abrupt, but she's a nice lady. She plays the piano beautifully...." Morien was absent-mindedly arranging the sections of the Sunday paper on the coffee table.

She had her back to Striker when she asked the question, and she asked it casually. "How did you know where I lived?"

Striker's heart sunk.

"Did you get my address from the hospital?" Morien turned round, her forehead creased slightly.

Striker nodded.

The creases on Morien's forehead deepened slightly. She was looking somewhere over Striker's shoulder. "I thought you weren't working this weekend."

Striker didn't say anything.

Morien looked at her. Striker was staring at her boots again; she could almost imagine her standing on the platform, waiting for the train to come. Except this morning she was more dishevelled. Her dark hair was wild over her shoulders. She smelt of stale alcohol and smoke. And there was blood on her hands. Morien was beginning to understand the look of abject guilt that plastered Striker's downturned face.

"You knew my address before we met yesterday, didn't you?"

Striker didn't say anything, but her jaw tightened.

"Look at me." Morien's words were commanding. They seemed to echo in the small room. They echoed in Striker's ears. She looked up.

Morien was almost startled by the look of defiance on Striker's face. It almost masked her features. Her jaw was set, her hands formed half-fists at her side. But her red-rimmed eyes were deep pools of guilt. "Why?" she asked.

Striker hadn't been expecting that. She'd been expecting rejection. She'd readied herself for the usual anger, recrimination, abuse - not this quiet question.

"I... I... wanted... to check... on you."

"To *check* on me? I don't think that's your job, is it?" Her voice was still quiet, but Striker could sense the growing anger: a storm coming in from the sea.

"No," she said.

There was a pause filled with trembling tension. Morien's hands were shaking. There were tears in her eyes. Striker retained her posture of defiance, but looked as if she was about to bolt.

Morien's voice shook. "Did you follow me?"

Striker hesitated. She knew she'd already dug a deep enough hole, now it was just a question of whether Morien was going to bury her alive. "I... I...." She never finished whatever it is she was going to say.

"You were following me?"

"Well... I was...."

"It was *you* following me?!" Morien moved so fast, Striker was surprised to see her tearful face so close. She took a step back, then another, afraid that Morien was going to hit her - and afraid how she herself would react if Morien did.

"I...."

"How could you do that? Do you know how scared I was?"

"I'm sor...."

"I don't believe it. I trusted you, and you're just some sick pervert who gets her kicks out of stalking someone."

"I wa...." She backed up a little more.

"How do I know you didn't mug me in the first place?"

"No, I'd...!"

"Get the hell out of my flat and get the hell out of my life."

Striker's reply was lost in the crash of the front door slamming in her face.

Continued in Chapter 5...

¹ From The Sleeping Beauty and Other Fairy Tales by Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch, admittedly from the final paragraph not the first. All the tales can be found online at www.bartleby.com

² From Menna Elfyn's poem Our First Sight of the Sea.

³ Blodeuwedd is a character in The Mabinogion - a woman created from flowers, but who has no heart.

⁴ Sappho used the Greek word *muqorçkos* meaning "fiction weaving" to describe love.

⁵ A reference to the wisdom of Atticus Finch in Harper Lee's To Kill A Mockingbird:

"You never really understand a person until you consider things from his point of view..."

"Sir?"

"..until you climb into his skin and walk around in it."

The Athenaeum's Scroll Archive

~ Misplaced People ~

by Devize

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Chapter 5: *If we shadows have offended...*¹

Striker was aware of the door-slam still bouncing off the walls of the hallway as she slowly made her way downstairs. She was aware of the grey eyes of Mrs Kantorowicz peering at her through the door of the ground floor flat. She was aware of a little flutter of net curtains as she started walking down the street in the direction of the nearest Tube station.

But she was too caught up in the red heat of emotion to really take any of it in.

It was happening again: the hurt, the misunderstanding, the pain ripping her in two ... *Morien, I just want to love you...* The phrase sobbed and sobbed inside her. But worst of all the certain knowledge that she had caused pain to Morien.

She broke into a run, making for the nearest Tube station, not allowing herself to think, not allowing her mind to settle on anything except the route home. Everything seemed blurred, even her own front door as she crashed through it.

Danny was in the sitting room with a woman. The blur encompassed the woman's Asian prettiness and the pair's startled expressions. Striker reached her room and slammed the door.

* * * * *

Morien was stunned by the noise: of the door, of her own angry voice, and of the confusion in her mind. She found herself reeling backwards, as if she'd had the door slammed in her face, then found herself falling.

She landed heavily on the carpet, barely acknowledging the pain in her backside until she found the bruises later. She sat there, shaking, allowing the tears that had been burning her eyes to stream down her cheeks.

Idiot. Idiot. How could I be taken in like that?

She felt angry, sad, incredibly stupid. She'd always thought she was a better judge of character.

But there had been something... something about Striker that had seemed... right.

Had she been so desperate for a friend that she'd fallen headfirst into a trap?

The remembrance of their lunch, now, was painful.

So right.

No, not right. She had stalked her, followed her, scared her - an act that felt so cruel considering her natural fear after the mugging. She felt betrayed, confused... How could she feel this deeply about someone she'd known for less than twenty-four hours?

*Gwyrionyn*². And this brought forth fresh tears.

She felt violated. She had let this woman in - why she didn't know - but she felt as if Striker had buried deep inside her, become a part of her, then abused her.

But you let her in, gwyrionyn. It takes two to be a victim.

She needed to shower. Again.

* * * * *

Striker stripped off her clothes. They smelt of cigarettes and alcohol, sweat and tree sap and underneath it all the unmistakable odour of remorse. And remorse smelt a little of dog pee. She wanted to shower, but didn't want to leave the bedroom. She didn't want to move from where she was sitting on the bed.

So, she'd done it all over again. Every single time she got close to someone she'd fuck it up. She'd sworn it wouldn't happen again. That's why she'd never approached Morien in the hospital, or after she left. She had just wanted to make sure she was all right. She had just wanted to make sure she was happy. She had just... wanted her.

With every fibre of her being. She had never felt this way about anybody in her life, and she had known from the start that if her relationship with Morien became more than fantasy she would end up hurting her. And the thought of hurting Morien was more than she could bear. The image of Morien's tearful face so close to hers... she felt her heart rip in two.

I've done it again. I've pushed someone else away.

* * * * *

The phone rang.

Morien flung a towel around herself and ran from the bathroom. She was about to pick up when she realised what she was doing.

Striker.

She rested her hand on the receiver, feeling the vibration of the ringing on her skin. It might be.

It might not be.

Why had she given this stranger her number?

Had she pushed Striker too far? Would she come after her? She remembered seeing the blood on her hand just a short time before; her wild appearance.

That thought made Morien as frightened as she had been for months.

And what if it wasn't Striker and she was dripping water on the phone while some innocent well-wisher was wondering if she was all right?

She could just push the button and let the machine take it....

Oh, for Christ's sake...

She picked up. "Hello?"

Her voice sounded high up and breathless.

"Mo, you okay?"

She let out a breath that she hadn't quite realised she'd been holding. "Hi, Drake..." A myriad of thoughts on the back of a nano-second rode through her mind. She could tell him what had happened. He would support her. He would comfort her. He would take care of her. He was her brother. He would encourage her to call the police. "...no, I'm fine... reit, dda. A chdi?"³

* * * * *

There was a gentle tap on the bedroom door.

"Sis, you okay?" Danny's voice squeezed its way through the crack.

"No." Striker's voice was muffled by the duvet.

"You want to talk 'bout it?"

"No."

"Can I get you anything?"

"No. Wait..." the voice seemed slightly less muffled. "Some cigarettes..." She almost asked for a bottle of whisky, but decided that alcohol had got her in enough trouble for the day. She would smoke herself to death instead.

"Sure, sis..." There was a pause. From underneath her bedclothes, Striker could sense that Danny hadn't moved away from the door. "Sis..." the voice came again... "...you got any money?"

Striker mouthed expletives into her pillow and pushed herself up. Her head was swimming, her blood felt as if it was melting the lining of her veins, her tongue seemed to be coated in something thick and toxic, and in the background to every thought was the loud and final sound of a door slamming. She found her wallet buried in her jacket on the floor, and fed a £10 note under the door.

"Thanks, sis," came the voice and soon after she heard the front door shut.

Striker fell back onto the bed, gazing up at the ceiling, watching forgotten cobwebs and dust

threads dancing in the breeze from the open window. She felt she couldn't move after a night of alcoholic excesses and sleeping in the street, but her mind wouldn't rest. Eventually, she managed to flip over onto her stomach and reached under the bed for a diversion. Anything. A little work on catches and lids and she pulled out a book. And had to laugh at what fate had put into her hand.

It had to be *The fucking Mabinogion*, didn't it?

* * * * *

"Are you all right, sis?" Drake asked again. His sister glared at him.

Morien had chosen to immerse herself in an afternoon of chaotic domesticity. Her brother's house was always full of life: mostly pre-school and baby life... noisy, irritating, messy and hopelessly endearing.

She reminded herself of the hopelessly endearing as eight-month-old Toby joyfully threw up his mashed banana as they were mid-way through lunch. And as two-year-old Macsen insisted on playing with his toy tool-set, hammering make-believe nails into furniture, doors, knees, hands, and his little brother's head, with a happy and continuous accompaniment of "Bang, bang, bang, bang, bang, bang, bang, bang, bang...!"

"Who in heaven's name gave him that?" Morien asked.

"My well-meaning father," her sister-in-law Kerensa said apologetically. "And it doesn't even have batteries to take out."

Morien rubbed a hand over her forehead, aware that the insistent banging of her nephew was beginning to sound a little like a door slamming.

"Are you sure you're all right, sis?" Drake asked for the hundredth time.

"Dw i'n *iawn*!"⁴ Morien insisted in an angry undertone. It was rare they spoke Welsh in front of Kerensa, but she knew that her use of the language would emphasise her point. Her little brother was concerned. She loved him for that, and she hated his fussing. All she had wanted was a little normality with her family and to get the painful echo of Striker out of her head. "I didn't sleep too well last night, that's all."

"Is there something...?"

A child's cry interrupted the moment of tension and they turned to find that Macsen had finally managed to miss his target and hammer his own fingers. Kerensa gathered him up in her arms. "Come on, my love," she said, kissing his round cheek, "you're getting tired, aren't you? Time for your nap."

"Let me take him." Morien got up reaching her arms out to her nephew. She didn't miss the glance that Kerensa gave Drake, but found the little boy in her arms despite it. Adult and child headed towards the stairs.

They were pussy-footing around her again. Treating her like an invalid. As if she couldn't do anything. As if a blow to the head had rendered her stupid... incapable... "Ow, Mo..." Her nephew wriggled in her arms.

"Sorry, bach," she said, putting him down carefully at the top of the stairs, and holding his hand as he tried to race down the hallway and into his bedroom. She lifted him onto his little toddler bed, but he seemed disinclined to lie down and just go to sleep.

"Can I have a story?" he asked.

"Story? Course you can have a story. Which one do you want?" She looked over at the little bookshelf, and in amongst the *Thomas the Tank Engine* and *Teletubbies* covers she spotted a Beatrix Potter. "How about this?"

"Peewabbi!" the little boy shouted. "Peewabbi, Peewabbi, Peewabbi...!" Morien put out a hand to make sure he didn't bounce himself off the bed.

"Yeah, Peter Rabbit! But, Macs, you've got to lie down, all right?" For a moment, a toddler cloud of disobedience crossed Macsen's half-baby face, but he could see his aunt wasn't going to give in, so he lay down and together they pulled the covers over him. Morien sat at the head of the bed, the little boy's head resting against her side, so he could see the pictures.

"Once upon a time there were four little rabbits, and their names were Flopsy, Mopsy..."

"Cottail..." Macsen said around a huge yawn.

"That's right, well done... 'Cotton-tail and Peter. They lived with their Mother in a sand-bank, underneath the root of a very big fir tree.'" His eyes were already drooping. She paused in her reading, watching his face begin to relax, and was stilled by a strange feeling of recognition that she couldn't place: as if she was lying there, her eyes closed, hearing a voice reading....

She shifted slightly, and his head slid onto the pillow. *Worn yourself out, haven't you, cariad?* She placed a gentle kiss on his forehead, stroking his hair as she stood up. Glancing into the cot in the corner to check on a slumbering Toby, she made her way back downstairs.

It was quiet in the sitting room now. Drake sat at the corner desk, a pile of exercise books to one side, a red pen in his hand. Kerensa almost lay in an armchair. She opened her eyes as Morien came into the room and nodded her head to a freshly brewed cup of tea sitting in front of the sofa.

Morien smiled her thanks and sat down herself. "Out like a light," she said, "both of them." She

took a sip of tea and regarded her brother's bent head. Sometimes it was if nothing had changed. They could be back in Lleuadaeth on a Sunday afternoon, Drake pouring over his homework, her curled up in a chair reading, and their father stretched out in the armchair, lost in the newspaper. But it was Kerensa on the armchair, there were two new additions to the family asleep upstairs, and the light that slanted through the window from the tiny courtyard garden was London sun. But it was as if nothing had changed. She and Drake were still looking after each other. However frustrating he got sometimes, she would never forget what he had done for her, or what he had gone through in those few days in February.

It had been Drake who had led the hunt for her. They hadn't realised she was missing immediately - she wasn't in the habit of speaking with family every day - but when Drake had tried to phone her... and phone again... and phone again... it had been he who had gone to her flat to find his own messages still blinking on her answerphone. It had been he who had contacted her work-mates to discover they had thought she was off sick. It had been Drake who'd gone to the police, rallied the family, phoned the hospitals again and again. It was Drake's face she had seen when she'd first come out of the coma. Or she thought she remembered....

"Drake...," she said."

"Mmmm...," he said, not looking up from the exercise books.

"When I was in hospital, when I was in the coma, did you read to me?"

Drake turned, a puzzled expression on his face. "No, why?"

"Do you know if anybody did? Dad or anyone?"

She had his full attention now. "I don't think so. You came out of the coma just after we found you anyway. You didn't give us the time to read to you! Why, Mo?"

She took another sip of tea, and thought about her answer. "I've been remembering... something. I could have sworn someone read to me. I just remember a voice...."

"Maybe it was one of the nurses. Have you thought about asking Mr Mistry or Mr Haywood? Or that other doctor...."

"Other doctor?"

"Yeah, the American woman in A&E."

"No," Morien replied with a wave of her hand. "No... it's not important."

* * * * *

She hadn't really read, just looked at the pictures in the book, running her fingers over the old, familiar words as if they were Braille. Eventually, a weight different to guilt had settled over her, and Striker had fallen into a deep sleep.

She dreamed about being chased.

Something horrific was chasing her down long, featureless corridors. She had thought it was St Vincent's but nowhere seemed to lead where it should.

She could hear footsteps around her, getting closer.

There was a voice, but she couldn't make out what it was saying.

There was laughter. Threatening laughter.

She found a stairway, her legs pumping under her as she ran downwards, but unsure of whether she was still being chased or rushing headlong into a trap.

The stairs seemed to be never ending.

She crashed against a door, sending her bouncing back into a darkened corridor.

Her lungs smashing into her chest, she rounded a corner and fell straight into the grasp of... herself.

Striker woke up in a cold sweat, her duvet sticking to her skin.

It was early afternoon. The light at the dirty window was different, cooler, as if it had lost interest in her bedroom.

No music. Danny must be out.

She eased herself off the bed, and poked her nose out of the door. No sign of life. She crept into the bathroom, and stood under the shower for what seemed like an age, welcoming the warm water on her skin, and the sound of it washing through her head.

But she couldn't seem to get clean. She scrubbed her skin until it was pink and raw. She scoured her hair until it squeaked.

She still didn't feel clean.

She finally gave up and turned the water off, feeling dirtier than before.

Wrapping her big, comfortable, towelling robe around her, she ventured out into the living room and looked at the phone.

What would Morien say if she called her?

She picked up the book, she picked up the receiver, and dialled the number. "Hello, am I speaking to Mrs Bailey? Mrs S. L. Bailey? Hello, Mrs Bailey, I'm sorry to disturb you... No, ma'am, I'm afraid you haven't won anything." *Please don't let me be related to her.* "I was wondering if..."

There was a scribbled note on the table.

Hey, sis, hope you're feeling better. Don't smoke them all at once.

Not only was there an unopened packet of cigarettes underneath the note, but he'd left her the change from the ten pounds as well.

She extricated a cigarette from the packet with one hand, as she listened to Mrs Bailey mumble apologies, then lit it as she dialled a new number.

* * * * *

The answer machine was flashing. Without thinking she pressed the button.

"Hi, cariad, it's Dad. Just phoned to say hello. Hope you're out having fun. Give me a call when you can."

Dear Dad. Morien suddenly felt very, very homesick. Later she'd give him a call.

The machine beeped to indicate the start of a new message.

And there was silence.

Nothing.

Was that... the sound... of someone... exhaling?

Morien imagined smoke coming from the machine.

Then the sound of the line being disconnected and a mechanical voice announced when the call had been made: 1.33 p.m.

Followed by another beep.

Silence.

Again.

A long, breath-filled silence.

And the line went dead.

2.42 p.m.

Another beep.

Silence.

A click as the line died.

3.27 p.m.

Beep.

Silence.

Click.

4.34 p.m.

Beep.

Silence.

Click.

5.30 p.m.

Five minutes ago.

No more messages.

Morien grabbed the receiver and dialled 1471. A polite cut-glass woman's voice said, "Sorry, the caller's number was withheld."

* * * * *

Morien joined the Monday morning dirge on the Tube, feeling about as sick as she ever had after a weekend. The carriage was thick with sweat and humidity as people shook themselves free of the warm rain outside and the weekend of sun and relaxation. Morien felt too tired to stand up, but was unable to move from between the two large, be-suited gentlemen that had come in

behind her. She hadn't slept. She felt too ill to go to work. But she was too scared to stay at home.

There had been one phone call last night. It hadn't even lasted five seconds.

The phone had rung.

She had picked it up.

The line had gone dead.

Every single one of those five seconds had felt like a lifetime.

She could have gone to her brother.

She could have talked to her father.

She could have gone to the police.

But she couldn't prove it was *Her*.

She had spent the evening flinching at every sound: the sound of a neighbour's phone ringing through the wall, the sound of creaking on the staircase, the sound of a footstep in the street, the sound of the rain.

And through the night, in those few moments of jumping sleep between the raindrops drumming on the window, she kept hearing that voice.

It was calm, quiet and immeasurably reassuring, like a cool hand on her fevered brow, and she knew now... in a growing, slow-burning realisation that made her cry with the pain and confusion of it... that that still, small voice was Striker's.

She couldn't escape.

Morien disentangled herself from her fellow passengers, fell out of the crush of the station, and headed down the wet street to work.

* * * * *

And into a scene from *Grease*.

It happened regularly on a Monday morning. Morien would walk into an office of giggling, gossiping work-mates - carefully segregated like a junior disco: women at one side of the room, men at the other - and be unwillingly regaled by tales of dancefloor wooing and sexual

conquests.

Sally was holding court at the window end, her voice in a falsetto whisper as she let loose another juicy titbit of information. Her tightly-styled hair jiggled in response to a roar of bawdy laughter coming from the men, upset at being interrupted, and the women around her drew closer as she opened her mouth....

Tell me more, tell me more....

Morien dropped into her seat, swinging her bag under her desk. She turned her computer on and reached for the nearest file to hide in.

"Are you all right?"

She half-wondered if her brother had wandered into the office, but looking up she found herself staring into the dark eyes of Asha, the only other person in the room who seemed uninterested in taking part in the chorus.

"Didn't sleep too well," Morien smiled weakly.

"Would you like a coffee?"

Maybe we could go for a coffee or something....

"Yes, thank you."

She liked Asha. She was quiet, bright, friendly, kept herself to herself and didn't ask difficult questions. From time to time the two of them would have lunch together and not exchange information about their private lives.

That wasn't true... completely. Morien knew that Asha still lived with her parents, spent much of her time with her family, and had an interest in music and reading. Asha knew that Morien enjoyed reading and art, spent much of her time with her family, and was gay... and didn't bat an eyelid. What they chose to do with the rest of their free time was their own business.

To the rest of the office, Asha was too respectable to be interesting, Morien was too weird to be interesting. That was fine by them.

Of course, Morien had had her own song a little while ago. Her colleagues had flocked round her when she had returned to work after the attack - concern, kindness and interest etched into their every word. *Tell us more, Morien, tell us more....* Then Donna had met a new man and her song was over.

A mug of coffee arrived in front of her. She sipped at it gratefully and regarded Asha through the steam. "Good weekend?"

Asha smiled and nodded, a surprisingly big grin on her face. "You?"

Morien made a face. "So what's happening with the Community Centre on the Woodhall Estate?"

* * * * *

At around lunchtime, Striker finally threw back the duvet. She hadn't slept, just listened to the sound of the rain. She felt grey.

Her life was a mess.

Her bedroom was a mess.

She picked up the clothes from the floor, and stumbling into the kitchen, flung them into the washing machine, and as an afterthought, squeezed her bedding in on top. Then she stood under the shower for a while, hoping it would make a difference. Throwing some clothes on, she started picking up rubbish from the living room: the pizza box, cigarette ends, empty beer cans...

Oh fuck, Dan... there was a used condom under the couch.

At least I know he practices safe sex with everyone.

She looked at the daisies in their jug. They still looked fresh. She couldn't bring herself to throw them away.

She flung the trash bag into the kitchen.

Then she took her jacket to the dry cleaners.

* * * * *

Monday bled into Tuesday.

The time had wrung Morien like a sponge, each beep of the answerphone twisting her tighter. There had been four messages, two at each end of the day, and another phone call just after she'd returned from work. She'd simply picked the receiver up, her mouth freezing round a greeting. The click as the call was ended made her throat constrict. The phone had rung again later. She had turned the volume down.

She flicked on television at some point, but the pictures were meaningless. Eventually, if only in a bid to move, to do something, she'd pulled the cover off the easel. She'd forgotten that she'd be

confronted by Striker.

Watching.

Morien had found herself mixing paint, and sweeping it over the whole picture. She felt tears streaming down her cheeks as she covered Striker's skin in heavy black oil. It didn't make her feel any better.

The time had danced with Striker. She had worked six 'til six in a constant pull of activity. Not busy, just constant, but the time had flown. She had surfaced into the early morning rain, the timid sun peeping from behind a grey cloud, turning the drops to rainbows and the air heavy.

She had drifted from sleep island to sleep island throughout the day, her mind whirring round eddies of thought with the snarl of Danny's music battering her through the wall.

Once Danny left, she crept out of bed and into the living room. And picked up the phone.

Eventually, she made a decision. And the seas calmed.

* * * * *

Morien had sipped at some soup for lunch. Sitting on her own in the staff canteen she watched the clouds, grey and heavy with gloom, inch their way across the sky.

Please leave me alone. I don't understand what you're doing to me. Please let me work this out.

She felt so saturated with emotion that she felt too heavy to move, but eventually her feet took her back to the office.

"Keith's looking for you," Asha said as Morien sat at her desk. With a deep sigh, Morien made to get up again. "Hey..." She looked at Asha. "You look awful. Why don't you ask Keith if you can go home?"

"No... no... I don't want... need... to go home."

Morien crossed to the end of the room and found Keith behind his paper mountain. "Asha said you wanted to see me?"

Keith seemed to look more messy than ever. He looked on edge and pale. His eyes fluttered over the piles of paper on his desk and landed unsteadily on her. "Oh, yes. Morien, could you organise a new agenda for next week's meeting between the police and the community leaders on the Woodhall."

Morien blinked, trying to concentrate. "A new agenda? I thought the meeting was supposed to

discuss drug dealing...."

"That's less of a priority now that the crime figures are down. I know the police are keen to follow up the general crime prevention discussion. Could you check that everyone concerned is happy with that?"

"Yes," said Morien, dully, "no problem." She turned to go.

"Oh, and Morien...."

"Mmm?"

"Your Tumblety Street proposal..." The words roused her more strongly than any pep pill.

"Yes?"

"...have you seen it?"

"Sorry?"

How could this happen? It had been officially consigned to his Pending Tray. Keith *never* went after anything in his Pending Tray. It was a standing joke in the unit. Why, in heaven's name, did he want it?

"Have you seen your proposal?"

"Er... I gave it to you on Friday." She hoped she looked suitable puzzled at his question.

"Yes, I know." His gaze wandered over the paperwork again, his brow creasing. "I just wondered if you'd moved it."

"Keith, does this mean that you've changed your mind about it?"

Again his glance flickered up at her. "No... no... I think there's something in it that might help us with another project... that's all."

"Oh... well, can I help at all?"

"No... thanks, Morien. I'm sure it'll be fine."

"Okay..." She backed away, wondering if he'd stop her. He didn't. He flicked through a pile of folders, absent-mindedly, apparently forgetting that she had even been there.

Morien went back to her desk, her heart beating in her throat.

* * * * *

Striker was glad for a few minutes break. The decision had been playing with her, her mind and hand toying with the number. She slipped into the staffroom and was relieved that she found herself alone. She approached the phone as if it was going to bite her. Dare she do this?

She had been thinking about calling all day. Hell, she'd been thinking about calling since Sunday morning. But she hadn't. And damn she was proud of herself.

But now she felt as if she wanted to say something... even if it was goodbye.

She checked the time. 5.57 p.m. She wasn't sure whether Morien would be home from work or not. Pot luck and the vagaries of the Tube would dictate whether she talked to a machine or had the phone slammed down on her.

With shaking fingers, she dialled the number. Her heart seemed to pound in time to the ringtone. And she heard the machine click on. "I'm sorry. No one's available to take your call right now, but please leave a message." Brief, to the point, and with that wonderful Welsh accent. For a moment she was tempted to put the phone down and call again, just to hear Morien's voice caressing the r's in 'sorry'. But then she became aware that she was supposed to be leaving a message.

And the words deserted her.

"Um... hi... Morien. It's... Striker. I... I know I'm the last person you want to hear from right now, but... I wanted to apologise... properly. What I did was... I'm pretty ashamed of myself. I know I don't deserve it but if you'd be willing to hear an abject and pathetic apology, please give me a call. I'm home tomorrow, my number is 555 7852...."

Ria's head appeared round the door. "Striker, there's a helicopter coming. They need you upstairs."

Striker nodded. "I gotta go, looks like it's gonna be a busy night. If I don't hear from you... I will understand. But please know, Morien, I'll always... wish you well."

She put the phone down, and ran upstairs to join the crash team and a busy night.

* * * * *

Morien opened her front door with trepidation.

She had deliberately dawdled: taking time to finish her work, turn off the computer, make sure her desk was tidy. She had walked slowly to the Tube, letting eager commuters push past her.

She had sat on the platform, watching trains come and go. As the crowds seem to thin, she got to her feet and stepped through the open doors of a carriage, confining herself in a corner.

She had almost missed her stop.

Deliberately.

And now she opened the front door.

She could see from the where she stood that the light on the answerphone was flashing.

She closed the door behind her, set down her bag, shook off her jacket and sat on the sofa. She stared at the phone.

The light blinked back at her.

With a shaking finger she pressed the button.

There was a beep.

Then silence.

"NO!" *I can't go through another night of this. I can't.*

Click. 8.09 a.m. Just after she'd left that morning.

She slammed her finger down on the stop button, then moved it to rest on Delete. But she couldn't delete the messages. What if there was a message from Dad or Drake or... even Sophie?

Instead, she hit the play button again.

There was a beep.

Then silence. She felt herself shaking.

Her finger moved to the delete button again. If it was urgent, they'd phoned back... they'd get into contact another way. She pushed down....

...but was stopped by a voice: "Um... hi... Morien. It's... Striker. I... I know I'm the last person you want to hear from right now, but... I wanted to apologise... properly. What I did was... I'm pretty ashamed of myself. I know I don't deserve it but if you'd be willing to hear an abject and pathetic apology, please give me a call. I'm home tomorrow, my number is 555 7852...."

There was a pause. Morien could hear another voice in the background, barely making out the words: "helicopter", "need you".

Then her voice again: "I gotta go, looks like it's gonna be a busy night. If I don't hear from you... I will understand. But please know, Morien, I'll always... wish you well."

Click. 5.57 p.m.

Morien pressed Stop, rewound the message, listened again. And found herself automatically taking down the phone number.

"...if I don't hear from you... I will understand. Just know, I'll always... wish you well."

Oh, Striker. Her relief was breathtaking.

She rewound again, listened again, and copied over the number in a heavier hand, doodling a flower next to it.

But then why...?

She let the answerphone play on. Then there was a beep.

And silence.

Morien stared at the answerphone. Click. 5.59 p.m. She glanced at her watch. That was fourteen minutes ago.

And it can't... *it can't*... have been Striker.

So who in the hell...?

The phone rang.

Suddenly, there was nothing in the world except for Morien and the ringing of the phone. The sound bounced off the walls, melted the apartment away from her, and screamed in every nerve in her body.

She grabbed at the receiver and the silence was deafening.

There were no need for words any more.

There was a click as the caller rang off.

* * * * *

She had pulled the phone cable out of the wall and cried herself to sleep.

But strangely felt better on Wednesday morning, as if at some time in the heavy night, a resolution had been found for her.

She would go to work. If there were any more non-messages on the answerphone that evening, she would seek help.

And Striker wished her well.

That one thought, in the maze of confusion, seemed to guide her way, and something inside her smiled. Although she wasn't sure what.

She knew now, believed totally, that Striker hadn't been making those calls - it was an astonishing relief... that now led her to a whole new weight of questions, both about Striker and about those phone calls.

So, Morien had showered, dressed, taken some aspirin, plugged in the phone and left for work.

* * * * *

There had been a multi-car pile up in the middle of the rush hour on the North Circular Road. This in turn had caused several minor accidents as commuters scrambled to take different routes home. Striker thought it was a miracle anybody could travel fast enough in the London rush hour to have that bad an accident.

It was certainly a miracle only one person died.

Striker herself had wanted to strangle several others. Didn't these bastards understand that someone with head injuries was going to take precedence over someone with a slightly bruised foot? She had been bled on, cried on, sworn at and vomited over.

And after six hours of overtime she'd been called into the sonofabitch's office and disciplined for using coarse language in the waiting area.

It was midday, and she fell through her front door and onto the couch.

Danny was just going out.

"Shit, woman, you look like the walking dead."

"Nnnnnnnnh."

"Need anything?"

"Nnnnnnnnnnh."

"Satta, sis."

"Dan..." Striker lifted her head from the couch cushion.

"Yeah?"

"Did anyone call?"

* * * * *

Morien had bumped into Mrs Kantorowicz at the corner of Easthouses Terrace, and together they had walked to their door. Mrs Kantorowicz had talked about her regular Tuesday visit to her friend.

Morien had listened politely and carried the old lady's shopping bags for her.

She saw Mrs Kantorowicz to her own apartment, then slowly took the steps up one flight of stairs. A darkened landing. Another flight of stairs....

* * * * *

Striker opened her eyes. She was still face down on the couch, fully dressed, one booted foot resting on the floor. One arm was still asleep under her. She shook it awake as she tried to concentrate on what had woken her.

The phone was ringing. The digital panel on the VHS twinkled 18:14.

She stretched out on the couch, hearing her back click satisfyingly as she reached for the receiver. "Yeah?" she said.

And a tiny Welsh voice said, "Striker, could you come over? I've been burgled."

Chapter 6: *The Rock and the Wind*⁵

"Hell, it's a mess."

Everything... *everything*... had been turned over, emptied, ripped apart and spread over the floor. Drawers regurgitated their contents, papers had been tossed across every surface, books lay

like broken bodies on the floor, and what looked like milk slowly drip-dripped its way from a white pool on the surface onto the tiled floor of the kitchen area.

And, in the centre of it all, Morien looked as fragile as Striker had seen her in the hospital. She watched as, heavily, Morien sat down on the sofa.

"Careful where you walk," she said in monotone. "There's glass by your feet. They smashed all the photo frames."

"Have you called the police?"

"No."

"You should...."

"Striker, they haven't taken anything."

"What do you mean...?"

Morien's voice was monotone, almost as if she an unenthusiastic tour guide of a heritage property. "There's some of my mother's jewellery in a drawer over there. They've been through the drawer, but it's still there. The remains of the TV are there." She nodded towards it. "They've taken the VHS apart. The parts are just over there. The stereo's still in one piece though...."

And her face crumpled into tears.

Something deep and sweet and infinitely raw tore open inside Striker as she saw the first tears fall from Morien's eyes, and without a breath she had crossed the room to put her arms around Morien.

"Hey," she said, "don't cry... don't cry. We'll get this sorted out, okay? Everything will be okay."

She looked down at Morien's bowed head. The day's headscarf had been pulled back slightly, revealing an expanse of auburn hairline. There was a freckle there. A tiny, pale freckle, that peeked out from just under a short, copper strand. And she couldn't resist any longer. She lowered her head just enough to rest her lips on Morien's forehead, and there she placed the tiniest, most tender of kisses.

Morien shifted, needing more, and slid her hands around Striker's back, holding the tall woman to her. She didn't want to let go. Ever. She felt safe, Striker's gentle reassurances caressing her skin, her firm embrace supporting and comforting. And the confusion and stress of the last few days poured out of her.

Neither of them knew how long they sat there. Morien's sobs had subsided and her steadier breaths were warm and moist against Striker's shoulder. Striker felt the movement of noise against her.

"What?"

Morien moved her head. "I'm sorry."

Striker pulled away from her so she could see into her face. "You're sorry? What have you got to be sorry about?"

Morien gave her a small smile. "For messing up your t-shirt." She looked away.

"Hey.... Hey...." Striker drew Morien's face towards her. "You have got nothing to apologise for. Look at this. Anybody would get upset at this...." It was her turn to look away now; her hand dropped to her lap. "Not to mention the fact that I ought to be down on my knees begging your forgiveness."

She felt Morien's hand on her leg. "Don't," she said. "I don't want you getting glass in your knees and bleeding all over everything."

Striker got up. "Okay," she said, "I better get the glass cleaned up so I can apologise properly. You got a broom or something?"

"There's a dustpan and brush under the... somewhere on the kitchen floor."

Striker made a careful step towards the kitchen, but stopped and turned. "Morien, are you *sure* you don't want to call the police?" Morien sighed. After February: the police, the questions; she didn't think she could bear it. Not again. She looked into Striker's eyes, the pale blue gaze penetrating her with quiet intensity. The sincerity in those depths was awe-inspiring. "I'll make the call," she said. "I'll stay with you."

"You'll stay with me?"

"I promise."

Morien nodded.

* * * * *

There had been a slow procession of visitors marking time up the stairs, appearing in the doorway, commenting on the mess: serious-faced uniformed officers; an intense, rain-coated detective; a distressed Mrs Kantorowicz, who made a tearful admission - "I had left something for my friend in my flat. I go back to find it. I leave front door open just for a few minutes...."; and Morien's landlord, ringing his hands.

Striker had salvaged mugs, tea bags and even half a pint of milk from the kitchen, and had made

tea. She wasn't very good at making tea, but had found herself improving with practice. She had watched as Morien was questioned, seemingly endlessly, questions fired as if they were bullets.

She had started to regret calling the police.

"Miss Llewelyn, you have no idea who might have done this?"

"No."

"Do you think it might be connected with the attack in February?"

"I don't know, really."

"You say that nothing was taken."

"Nothing seems to have been. There might be something I've overlooked, but all my valuables are still here."

"So, do you think they might have been disturbed before they took anything?"

"It's possible."

"Could one of your neighbours have disturbed them?"

"I suppose so."

"So you think one of your neighbours might have been around at the time?"

"I know Mrs Kantorowicz was out for the day. Mr Phillips, just below, he works similar hours to me."

"Well, we will check with them. Mrs Kan... the lady downstairs might have seen something if she left the door open. Miss Llewelyn, do you think they were looking for something?"

"What?"

"Do you think they might have been looking for something?"

"Such as what?"

"I don't know, I'm asking you."

"Detective, I don't own anything that would mean anything to anyone but me."

Which started a new rash of questions.

Striker fixed her eyes on Morien's face, watching the tiredness wash like a tide across her features. Her head turned and she caught a green gaze, a little smile, and she moved to the sofa to sit next to her. Morien reached for her hand and the gesture amazed her. She held on for dear life.

The detective, Sergeant Manifold he'd called himself, was young, blond-haired and eager. He had launched himself into another question.

"Miss Llewelyn, have you received any threats recently?"

Morien paused, comforted by the feel of Striker's soft, warm palm beneath her own. "No, not threats."

The detective looked at her, puzzled. "Not threats...?"

She could feel Striker's eyes on her.

"I've been receiving phone calls."

Striker's hand twitched beneath her own.

"What phone calls, Miss Llewelyn?"

What phone calls, Morien? Phone calls... phone calls... She envisaged her fingers tapping their way across the telephone keypad.

Morien was speaking. "They're not threatening or anything. They ring then hang up."

"How long has this been happening?"

"Since Sunday."

She sensed the catch in Striker's breath. Striker had a vivid flash of another time, another detective, questioning her, threatening her. Tears and recriminations rang in her head. But she hadn't done it. She hadn't done it this time.

"And you don't hear anything else?"

"No... nothing."

"Do they call regularly - a particular time of day, for example?"

"It's changed. I spent the day with my brother on Sunday. When I got back I had an answerphone full of silent messages. They'd phone almost every hour throughout the day."

"Did you keep the messages?"

"I deleted them. They scared me."

"And when you came home. Were there any further calls?"

"Yes, one phone call. When I answered they hung up."

"So they didn't call again that evening?"

"No."

"And since the weekend?"

"They've phoned just after I left for work. The answerphone picked it up."

"Any more?"

"There was another message, just before six o'clock, and someone's phoned just after I got in and sometimes later in the evening."

"Have you received any of these phone calls at work?"

"No."

"Any today?"

Morien started. "Oh, I don't know." She hadn't even looked at the answerphone. All she'd taken when she'd phoned Striker was Striker's number and the devastation of her flat. Now they could all see the light was blinking, and Morien felt the now familiar surge of panic swell within her. She reached out and pressed the button.

Beep.

Silence.

Click.

8.12 a.m.

Beep.

Silence.

Click.

11.42 a.m.

No other messages after 11.42.

Of course. "They were checking up on me? Checking to see if I was home?" Morien's voice sounded childlike. She now held Striker's hand with both her own.

Manifold only said, "Or making sure you were out. Could we take the machine? We might be able to pick something up." Morien nodded.

"Miss Llewelyn, you say these calls scared you. Why didn't you report them immediately, to us or the phone company?"

Morien paused, and took a deep breath. "I thought I knew who it was."

Striker shifted beside her. Morien glanced sideways. Striker's head was turned away, her face and expression hidden by hair escaping from her plait.

"Who?" asked the detective.

"I doesn't matter now. I know I was wrong."

"It would help us if we could eliminate this person from our enquiries."

"No." Morien shook her head firmly.

Sergeant Manifold sniffed loudly, glancing between the two women.

"Miss Llewelyn, who else has had access to your flat?"

"Access?"

"Friends, family, other visitors...?"

Morien thought. "My brother and his wife, my grandparents have visited. My father was here a few weeks ago... and there's Sophie, of course."

"Sophie?"

Sophie?

Striker's head jerked up.

"Sophie Cometti. She lives here too." Morien caught the sergeant's fleeting look around the apartment, taking in its compact nature, it's one and only bed.... "She's my girlfriend."

And Striker's insides backflipped. *WHAT?!!! Where the fuck did she come from?!* She could feel her heart hammering against her ribcage. She felt sure that Morien could feel it pulsing.

She glanced round, and realised that Manifold was looking at her. He dragged his attention back to Morien. Striker closed her eyes and tried to breath.

"And where is she now, Miss Llewelyn?"

"She's in South America. On a charity work placement."

"How long has she been there?"

"Since the beginning of the year."

"And she hasn't been back since."

"She hasn't been able to."

"Would there be anyone who holds a grudge against her?"

"Sophie? No, not Sophie. Besides, everyone knows she's away."

"Do you think there could be anyone who might resent your relationship?"

Striker opened her eyes, she could have sworn just in time to see the detective looking away.

"I... I can't think of anyone."

Manifold nodded slowly. "I have to ask you this. Were yourself and Miss..." he glanced at his notebook, "...Cometti on good terms when she left?"

"Yes! Yes, of course."

"And you've been in touch with her since she's been in South America?"

"Oh yes. We write to each other all the time. And she phones when she can." Striker could hear the smile in Morien's voice. It burnt her. "She's based in the middle of nowhere, up in the Andes, so she hasn't got easy access to a phone, unless she visits the nearest town."

To Striker, the contact between herself and Morien felt like a flame. But she couldn't let go. Her free fingers drummed on the sofa repeatedly.

The detective regarded their joined hands. "And would there be any reason why Miss Cometti would be concerned about your relationship?"

That was it. "What the hell are you implying?" The words were out of Striker's mouth before she'd even realised what she was thinking.

Manifold stared at Striker, but addressed Morien. "If you could answer the question, Miss Llewelyn, I would be grateful."

Morien's hand slipped out of Striker's. She straightened her skirt. "No. There is *no* reason why Miss Cometti should be concerned about our relationship, detective." And it suddenly felt as if Morien had taken charge.

Sergeant Manifold stood up, and Morien followed him. "Well, thank you, Miss Llewelyn, that'll be it for now. Of course if you or your *friend* think of anything or wish to talk to me, you can contact me at the station." He looked again at Striker. It was a look that said, "I haven't finished with you." Striker imagined him as a little smoking patch on the floor. "The chances are that it's a simple burglary..."

"...but how would they know my...?"

"..and unfortunately, there's little real chance of catching them. Of course, you've been lucky, they don't seem to have taken anything. Here's your paperwork..." he shoved a document into Morien's hands, "...you'll be needing that for any insurance claim." He bundled up the answerphone, and pulled his raincoat around him. "There'll be a forensic team over tomorrow morning. Thank you for the tea."

And he was gone.

Striker leapt after him. "Tomorrow?! What's she supposed to do until tomorrow?!"

But he was already halfway down the stairs.

"Stupid, fucking bastard," she only half-mumbled.

Suddenly, the flat seemed eerily quiet. It was dark outside. The rain fell on the June night, shuttering the rest of the world behind their closed doors, behind their curtained windows. Little individual dramas behind every wall: hearts breaking, memories haunting, souls crying....

Striker found herself at Morien's front door again, half expecting it to shut in her face. It didn't. Morien stood amid the wreckage of her life and looked at her.

"That's why I'm sorry," she said.

Exhaustion crashed over Striker until she felt her knees begin to buckle. She managed to step back into the apartment and closed the door behind her. "What?" she said, her voice flat. Her mind was thrumming with a single word: *girlfriend, girlfriend, girlfriend, girlfriend....*

"I'm sorry for not telling you."

"Telling me what?"

"About the phone calls."

"Oh," Striker smiled, weakly. "You thought it was me?"

Morien nodded, shamefaced.

"I don't blame you," Striker said. "I don't blame you at all." She scrubbed her face with her hands, as if this would help her make sense of the last half hour. "After what I've done...."

"You read to me."

Striker removed her hands from her face.

"What?"

"You read to me in hospital, didn't you?"

"You remember? Coma patients aren't supposed...."

"I remember. I can't believe I forgot." She looked round her flat. "I suppose I can tidy up a little now, change the bedclothes...."

"You can't stay here."

"I can't leave it. The lock's been forced. The door won't close."

"Any thief would have to get past the front door and Rottweiler-woman downstairs, wouldn't they? Anyway, pack up anything you don't want to lose sight of and come back with me. We'll tidy up tomorrow."

Morien didn't miss it: "We...." She took a step forward and gently moved her arms around Striker. "Thank you."

Striker stood awkwardly for a moment. Her conscience taunted her. *Girlfriend, girlfriend, girlfriend....*

Fuck you, she responded and returned Morien's embrace.

Chapter 7: *Words, Wide Night*⁶

As Morien packed a bag, Striker had salvaged the coffee. She had wanted something stronger, but whisky didn't seem to be Morien's drink, and there was no beer, no wine... no alcohol whatsoever.

She opened the window to light a cigarette, leaning into the damp air. She could feel drizzle against her skin, but the nicotine felt good in her blood.

"I wish you wouldn't smoke," Morien said behind her.

Striker turned, carefully leaving the burning cigarette outside. "You want me to put this out?"

"It's bad for you. You can get all sorts of nasty things through smoking."

"I know." She leaned back outside, taking another couple of puffs and watching sparks disappear into the dark.

"So why do you smoke?"

"Habit. Bad habit." She stubbed the cigarette out on the brickwork by the window and flicked it into the night. "So why did you call me?"

There was a sigh from behind her. "Not habit."

Yet?

She turned.

Morien had a small holdall at her feet, and her fingers tangled with the handles of her tapestry bag, tossed over her shoulder. "I couldn't get hold of anyone else."

Striker nodded, her face clouded, and Morien immediately regretted lying. "No, that's not true. I mean... I ... I wanted to call you," she finished simply.

Striker's expression didn't change, but Morien noticed the tiniest relaxation of her jaw and that ball of tension that she'd felt bloom inside her since Sunday morning, finally burst like dandelion seeds in a puff of wind.

Striker closed and locked the window. "Come on," she said. "I feel like I could sleep for a week, so fuck knows how you must be feeling."

* * * * *

Approaching midnight, and she had led Morien across the dark, shadow abstract that was the Bronte Estate and up the grimy concrete stairs to her apartment - not sure if it was a good thing or a bad thing that the urine-scented lift was out of order. "Please keep in mind," she said as she opened the door, "that I live in pigsty." She flicked on a light.

"Please bear in mind where we've just come from," Morien replied. "Your..." she searched for the word unsuccessfully, "...isn't in?"

"Apparently not. And I don't know if he'll be back tonight. Danny comes and goes as he pleases. In all sorts of ways." She lifted an eyebrow and smiled. "I would offer you his bed... but I'd hate for you to get a surprise in the early hours. Have my bed... I'll take the couch."

Striker pushed open her bedroom door and flicked the light switch. It was a good sized room, bigger than the bedroom that Morien shared with Sophie, but it was strangely devoid of personality. There was a plain wardrobe and a battered chest of drawers, the walls were a bland off-white, there were no pictures. The threadbare carpet was dark grey and needed vacuuming. There was a toppling pile of un-ironed clothes on the floor by the chest of drawers. There was a lamp on the floor by the bed, and a large old-fashioned alarm clock. The bedclothes were plain blue. The bed was enormous.

"It's huge, I'll get lost in that thing," Morien said.

"Well, that means you'll be comfortable. The bathroom's next door." Striker turned to go.

Morien envisioned her closing the door, leaving her on her own. The room was empty, alien. Suddenly, being alone felt like the worst thing in the world. "Striker, you can't sleep on the couch all night."

"I'll be fine."

"What if Danny comes home? Won't he wake you up out there?"

Striker smiled. "Probably, but better me than you."

"Striker..." Morien caught her bottom lip in her mouth. Striker found herself staring at the gesture. "Striker, I don't want to be on my own." Morien's words came out in a rush, but her eyes dragged their way up Striker's body, until she felt she could meet her eyes.

Striker's heart sank. She didn't know what gods were doing this to her, but she felt taunted, manipulated, hung out to dry. It felt like a test... a test for a lady's hand... except this lady's hand belonged to another. *I can't do this....*

"I...."

"Striker, it's a huge bed. Please stay with me."

"I can't...." She didn't know how to finish that sentence.

Morien stared at her. Her brow suddenly wrinkled. "Do you have a problem with me being gay?"

Fuck no!... Yes! I have a problem with you having a girlfriend, but that's not the same thing...

Striker felt herself goldfishing. "No, no of course I don't."

"Look... I'm a quiet sleeper, or so I'm told. I promise I won't touch you, if it worries you. I... After all that's happened..." Morien was momentarily reminded of the first time she'd seen Striker on the station platform. It was the same expression: a rabbit caught in headlights. "I'm sorry. This is wrong of me. If you'd prefer the couch, I do understand."

"No... I'll stay."

* * * * *

Self-consciously, she'd changed in the bathroom. She didn't usually wear clothes in bed, so had picked an old, baggy t-shirt and a pair of Danny's hipsters which had been mixed up with her laundry. She hoped she wouldn't get too hot... in all sorts of ways.

She now sat on the side of the bath, staring into the mirror and steeling herself for the night. This was her first time.

The first time.

She was thirty-two years old and she felt like an inexperienced teenager out for her first grope. Except the groping wasn't the problem. If groping had been part of this package she wouldn't be hiding in the bathroom. Sex was definitely no problem. The rest of it was.

This was the first time she'd shared a bed with someone she was actually, honest-to-goodness, head-over-heels in love with.

Her blue eyes stared back at her from the mirror. Her face was pale. There were dark patches under her eyes. She wanted a cigarette, but didn't want to bring the smell of smoke into the bedroom. Her hands were shaking.

Fuck, you're pathetic.

She braced herself, opened the bathroom door and doggedly made her way to the bedroom.

In the light of the lamp, Morien sat on the far side of the bed, her face in shadow. She was wearing a short-sleeved nightshirt covered in a delicate embroidered floral design. It toned with the bed.

She still wore her headscarf.

"Hi," Striker said from the door.

Morien looked round. "Hi," she said, shyly.

Striker, amazed at her own boldness, shut the door and crossed to the bed, slipping herself under the covers. *Damn, maybe I can do this....*

Morien didn't move.

"Are you okay? Can I get you anything?"

"I'm fine, really," she said, then slowly slid her hand up and tugged away her headscarf.

Oh....

Her auburn hair was growing longer at her forehead, round behind her ears, and down the back of her neck, but the large patch of newly grown stubble at the back of her head couldn't disguise the vivid, angry scar that tore across her scalp.

"I couldn't bear to get it all cut off," she said, without looking at Striker. "It would be like admitting defeat... you know? Everyone says it will grow back... eventually, but...."

She finally looked round, terrified at the expression of horror that would be sure to grace her new friend's face. But found herself gazing at acceptance.

Striker resisted the temptation to run her fingers across the patch of dark red fuzz. The dim light shimmered across the strands, turning them to flame. "You have beautiful hair," she said. "Never believe otherwise."

Morien's relief was tangible, but Striker simply smiled and pulled at the covers. Morien slid under them and settled down. Striker switched out the light and the two of them lay in darkness.

"You know something....," Striker said. "I still owe you that apology."

A heartbeat. Another. Then, "I think you've put up with enough from me this evening to warrant any apology completely unnecessary."

"Never."

The word seemed to resound.

"Can I ask you a question?"

A moment of hesitation.

"Yes?"

"Why *did* you follow me?"

That was a question Striker didn't want to answer, mostly because there were so many possible answers and she had no idea which one was true. Or if they were all true. She had followed Morien because she genuinely cared about her, because she was very attracted to her, because she was curious, because she was scared of her, because she was scared of herself.... She could go on and on. But Morien was waiting.

"I followed you because I... wanted to make sure you were all right. I... I wanted to make sure that you were being looked after."

"I was."

"I know."

"You could have asked. You could have come up and asked me."

"I know, but..."

"But?"

"I didn't want to intrude. You had so many people around you, anyway, why would you want some stranger prying?"

Striker sensed Morien's smile. "I'm glad... we're not strangers now."

Striker felt warm at the comment. She glowed with it, enjoying the resonance of the words in her mind and in her body. It would be so easy just to reach out and touch her. *Just touch her, nothing else....*

Only, to be interrupted by Morien's voice. "So, what did you find out about me, stalker?" Again, there was a smile in the words.

"I found out where you lived. I found out you have a family who love you very much. I found out where you worked, though I didn't know what you did there..."

"You really didn't find out that much, did you?"

"Hey, I couldn't stalk you 24/7. I have a job to do, I have hospital management to freak out. I have patients to scare. Tell you what, I'll do the job properly. I'll take some leave next month and I'll stalk you full time for a couple of weeks. Is that good for you?"

Morien's laugh echoed round the bedroom and made Striker tingle with delight.

"How come you get all the fun?" she returned, her voice rippling with joy. "How about if I take leave and stalk you for a couple of weeks?"

"Don't know what you'd get out of it," Striker replied. "You know where I work, you know

where I live...."

"I can wheedle out all those little details of your life..."

"...I like baseball, I don't have a favourite colour, I sleep weird hours..."

"I can find out about the family who love you...."

And the conversation hit a brick wall at high speed.

There was a long, long silence.

And then something moved in the wreckage. The flailing limb of life. "My family's out picking up women right now."

Morien didn't know how to respond. She was going to open her mouth and say something placatory, something shallow and uncontroversial, but there was a mumble from beside her: "Might be more interesting if we both stalked Danny."

This time, the lull in the conversation was more relaxed, like a natural break between stanzas, yet still full of expectation and uncertainty. Then the next line.

"Tell me about your family," Striker asked.

"What?"

"Tell me about your family..."

"All of them?"

"How about your brother... your dad...."

"Why?"

"Because I'm interested. You seem like a nice family. What does your dad do?"

"He's a teacher."

"What does he teach?"

"Literature."

"Big surprise there."

Morien could feel a warm buzz of amusement through the bedclothes. She returned the smile in the dark. "He's good at it too. Makes all the difference when your father happens to be one of the

most popular teachers at your school."

"He taught you?"

"Mmm hmm. Me and Drake."

"And what does Drake do, apart from fussing over his sister?"

"Oh, he doesn't just fuss over me, he fusses over his students..."

"He teaches too?"

"Yup, and he fusses over his wife and children as well."

"Your brother's got kids? He's twelve!"

"He's twenty four."

"I was close!"

Morien giggled. She was enjoying this.

"So, you gonna tell me he's got eight kids with green eyes and red hair?"

"No, two, both boys. Macsen and Toby."

"Toby? Poor kid!"

"Could've been far worse. Drake wanted to call him Taliesin."

"Poor kid!! Your brother is weird!"

"My brother is a good brother and a good father."

Striker felt the purr of affection in Morien's voice and bathed in that sound. There was a comfortable silence which was eventually broken by the American. "What about your mother?"

The words were accompanied by a sigh. "She died when I was eight. Leukaemia"

"I'm sorry."

Morien paused for a moment. There was something different. This was a new variation on the many condolences she'd heard in her life. Somewhere, buried underneath the familiar phrase and the genuine sentiment, was a strange... *longing*.

She felt a question on her lips and felt bound to ask it. "Striker..." She felt a tremor of

expectation next to her. Striker knew what was coming. "What about your mother?"

There was a silence, then, "My mother?"

"You said you'd come over to England to see your mother."

Another silence, and then came a simple statement. "I lied."

"You lied?" It wasn't an accusation, and there was no anger in the words. It was a question, plain and simple.

Striker turned over, her back now to Morien. She didn't tell this story to anyone. It hurt too much. There were those that knew... bits and pieces. Danny knew the basics - she had to explain the phone bill somehow - but he didn't push it. But Striker had a feeling that if she started to tell Morien, she wouldn't be able to stop. She loved Morien, she knew that - she loved her even more since she'd actually met her - but did she trust her?

Morien kicked herself. She'd been aware of Striker's movement - and the other woman was now curled on her side, facing away from her, every syllable of her body's language crying *Keep Out*. She had upset her, and Morien was shocked by how much that hurt.

But then she heard Striker let out a sigh and she started to speak. Her voice seemed distant. "I came to England to find my mother." Morien found herself edging closer to be able to hear Striker's quiet voice, and to be able to offer support by her presence. She was careful not to touch her.

Striker swallowed and continued. "I haven't seen her for twenty two years. She walked out when I was ten."

Morien wanted to reach out a hand, just to touch her shoulder, but was scared that she might frighten Striker, might stop her from talking. This was a story that was rusty from neglect and it was aching and hesitant in its telling.

"It makes my mother sound like a bitch, doesn't it? She wasn't. My father stifled her. He wanted to own her, control her and she couldn't live with that. She was desperate. They were such different people. It was amazing how long she did stay and put up with it. It was amazing they got married in the first place. Anyway, she came back to England."

A chapter had closed, but Morien wondered if there was more to come. Her hand inched closer to Striker, but it was her voice that reached her first. "She didn't keep in touch?"

Again, a pause, and again Morien wondered if she'd pushed too far.

Striker suddenly shifted again. She was back on her back. It had been surprisingly easy to force the words past the lump in her throat and now it was just as easy to keep going... to follow the flood to the safe harbour of Morien.

"She kept in touch. She wrote all the time: long letters every week, postcards and cards almost every day, sometimes two in a day. She sent candy and toys, bits and pieces she thought I might like, books, lots of books.... And she called too. But it was tough for her. She had to get past my dad. When she called he would answer and more often than not they'd end up fighting. Dad was so angry with her for leaving. He was so angry with her."

Striker swallowed. She had closed her eyes, storytelling to the dark. Seeing the pictures in her head. Seeing her father's livid face, hearing his furious words, and the bang as the phone receiver was crashed into its cradle. She felt all over again the cutting disappointment that that noise had meant: at not being able to talk to her mother again, hear her voice.

She wanted so badly to hear her mother's voice.

"But she kept in touch, one way or another, for five months. She told me that she'd got a job, that she had somewhere to live. And always... always... she'd tell me how much she wanted to see me, how much she missed me... loved me..." There was a long sigh. "She talked about me coming over to visit... maybe even to live with her. That's what she wanted... that's what I wanted..."

And now another pause, longer than the rest.

Morien's eyes were getting used to the gloom. A faint glimmer of London night penetrated the heavy curtains. She could see the shape that was Striker lying next to her in the big bed. She could hear her soft breaths, slow and even. There was no other sound. Even London was waiting.

"What happened?" she finally asked.

"I don't know," Striker replied, abruptly. "She stopped writing."

Striker turned over, her back to Morien.

And the story ended.

The muffled buzz of the city slowly buried its way into Morien's consciousness.

Then there was a loud click and the sound of voices from the sitting room. Morien found herself silently smiling at the hypothetical situation of her being joined in Danny's bed by the man himself and his guest. Would he have minded?

Then came the humming of mutual gratification, and a giggle, and the click of a light switch. A glow of light appeared under from under the bedroom door, and she could see Striker's face, turned away from her. Her skin seemed to glow from within.

The bedroom door opened a crack and a quiet voice heavy with drink, and flirting both with south London and the West Indies said, "Hey, sis, you got any fags?"

There was a kind of rumble from the other side of the bed and a husky voice said, "Drawer... kitchen table..." The door began to close and Striker called louder, "Don't smoke them all."

The door shut.

There was a silence.

"He always smokes my cigarettes," the muffled explanation came from under the duvet.

"Then don't smoke," Morien replied from her side of the bed.

There was a chuckle.

The tension broke.

A warm, comfortable ambience descended. Morien's thoughts turned to the woman beside her: her kindness, her generosity, the blood on her hands, her voyeurism, the faith in her that Morien seemed to feel intrinsically. Striker had read to her like a mother does a child. And she'd stalked her. Morien didn't understand her. She didn't know her. She had said that they weren't strangers, but she didn't even know her name.

What kind of a name was Striker anyway?

What the hell am I doing?

Every logical bone in her body was screaming questions at her, screaming danger.

And her heart whispered trust.

Morien had craved her friendship before she even knew who she was. There had been a pull of need since she'd first heard her voice - like the need for her mother's memory - which had only increased since their meeting on the station platform. She had known that this stunning woman, with the impossibly blue eyes, was going to be important in her life: one way or another.

But what way did Morien want?

Striker had quickly become a friend, perhaps some kind of surrogate sister. She moved her head so she could once again make out the curves beneath the bedclothes.

She could smell Striker's skin. It was warm, a mixture of rich masculine and flowery feminine, and slightly smoky. It made her wonder if it tasted the same way, and her tongue tingled with an unexpected anticipation.

And her mind turned to Sophie and a bolt of guilt ripped through her.

It had been so easy to love Sophie. She was sweet and kind and supportive and enthusiastic about everything around her. She was enthusiastic about her charity work and enthusiastic about going to Peru and her enthusiasm shone in the letters she wrote to Morien, about the work she was doing and the South American landscape and the culture and the people she was working with.

It had been so easy to let Sophie go, and be quiet and on her own. Even after the attack she hadn't needed Sophie to come home. Sophie had cried on the phone - trying to find a way to come home and be with her girlfriend. Morien had been genuinely sorry when no way could be found. But now she realised, she hadn't needed her to come home. Despite everything, she hadn't needed her.

It had been so very easy to love Sophie.

She did love Sophie. Very much.

But...

But...

The first doubt. The first conscious doubt.

Morien felt a lump in her throat.

She would have to tell Sophie about the flat. She really didn't want to tell Sophie about the flat. She wanted to tell Sophie that everything was fine, that work was fine, that home was fine, that she wasn't being terrorised by mystery phone calls. That she wasn't currently in another woman's bed.

Maybe she should have stayed at home, but the thought of her possessions strewn across her floor and the thought of the phone ringing....

She started to cry.

It was the slightest of noises that alerted Striker. She had almost been asleep, lulled by the sound of Morien's breathing and the exhaustion of the evening: thoughts of her mother once again tucked safely behind the walls of denial. But then there was a hitch - the tiniest change in the air.

Morien felt Striker's body warm against her back; felt rather than heard the words *Come on*. An arm slipped over her and a gentle hand settled against her stomach. She shifted back, her breath catching in her throat, and found a willing berth on Striker's shoulder, as another arm moved under her body to cradle her.

Striker felt the smooth velvet of Morien's short hair beneath her cheek. Briefly, she allowed herself to nuzzle it, cherishing the feeling on her skin.

Morien's quiet sobs faded into the dark and her breathing quietened.

They lay like that until the London night claimed them.

Chapter 8: *Where you're going to turn*

There are many advantages to being tall, was one of Striker's first coherent thoughts the following morning. Others were simple words: warm and safe and loved. And the first fully conscious thought was: Well, damn, I actually slept.

They had barely moved during the night, only to shift closer together; so close together that Striker was sure that the next millimetre would take her inside Morien... and that way lay dragons.

So, Striker didn't move. She simply relished her height and the way her long body contained Morien's shorter length so perfectly. She could feel Morien's heels resting against her own ankles. Their knees dovetailed, the pressure of skin on skin as soft as feathers. Morien's firm, rounded backside was flush against... *Oh God, she feels so good... that is truly... fuck, these hipsters are hot.* Striker's breasts were wonderfully sensitive against the plain of Morien's back. One arm was draped over Morien's still form, her hand having taken up happy residence in the valley of Morien's stomach; the other arm pillowed Morien's head, and stretched out along the sheet, this hand gently surrounding Morien's fist, like a shell treasuring its kernel. Her cheek rested comfortably against the top of Morien's head.

She didn't move, afraid that the slightest change in position would wake Morien. Would she be frightened? Upset? Angry? She had a girlfriend already, after all.

Sophie.

Sophie, I have her now. Right now, she's mine. Now I can hold her in my arms, feel her breath on my skin, hear those little secret sounds of sleep that are meant only for my ears. She's mine to touch.

Morien sighed in her sleep. A warm, contented breath in the still room. Striker closed her eyes, feeling every inch of body against body, her heart praying.

Morien, let me love you. Does she love you like I do? Does she treasure each word, each touch of your hand? And how does she touch you? Does she touch you like I want to touch you? Does she kiss you, caress you, does she make you moan? Does she make you sigh her name?

The morning sunshine filtered through the bedroom window, turning the room from a cold shadow to an enchanted bower. Just for the loveliest of moments, it was her bower, with her lady-love.

Striker didn't want to move.

Then, she was jerked backwards by the force of Morien's awakening.

"God, what's the time? I've got to get to work!" she said as she sat up.

Striker felt breathless with the loss of the moment, but then realisation hit her. "There is no way in hell you're going to work."

Morien looked round. "But, I can't not...."

"Hey," Striker felt a inexplicable burst of anger. "You had a shit-ass day yesterday, there's a shitload of stuff that still needs to be organised. You can't do that and go to work. They'll understand."

"But...."

"I'll call in. What's the number." With a wrench of regret, Striker got out of bed.

"Striker...."

"Morien, I don't care what you say. You are not going to win this. You are not working today. Now, what's the number and who do I need to speak to?"

"Striker, please don't tell them what's happened."

"Fine, you're sick. I'll tell 'em you've got the Ebola virus. What's the number?"

* * * * *

Morien listened as Striker made the call.

"Hello, may I speak to Keith Tivison please? I'm on hold. Jesus, what is this shit? Can't they get better hold mus... Hello, Mr Tivison? Good morning, Mr Tivison, my name is Striker West. Striker West, sir. No you don't know me, I'm a friend of Morien Llewelyn. Yes, Morien. I'm afraid she's sick today. I know, I know she has been off-colour lately. It looks like she's come down with a nasty case of gastro-enteritis. Stomach flu, sir. She's been throwing up all night, and, of course, it can be highly contagious. Yes, Mr Tivison, I think it's best that she stays home the rest of the week. And yes, sir, I will make sure she gets to the doctor too. I'll give you a call next week to let you know how she's doing. You're welcome, Mr Tivison, and you have a nice day. Goodbye." She put the receiver down. "You could have made some barfing noises in the background."

Morien's mouth was hanging open. "Striker, you said a day...!"

"Stick with me, kid, I'll get you the month off."

"I don't want a month off. I've had too much time off already."

Striker mentally kicked herself. "I'm sorry. But you need some time... just 'til the end of this week, okay? Look after yourself, Morien, please."

Morien nodded, a look of resignation on her face. She went back into the bedroom and shut the door.

Striker stared after her, nervous about following, nervous about staying out. Instead, she went into the kitchen and found Danny hadn't smoked all her cigarettes. She lit one and inhaled the smoke, letting it burn all the way down her throat. Then she looked around the sparse kitchen and thought of food.

She hadn't eaten since... *Jeez, Vinnie's.* Her search for food became more earnest.

* * * * *

Morien slipped into the shower. She felt tense, upset, guilty, nervous about the day to come, but somewhere inside a quiet chord of serenity played. Despite the fear of the last few days, despite the mess that was once her apartment, despite her current frustration with Striker... it had been a good night. She had slept well. She had felt sheltered from a storm, only to wake up in the arms of a balmy morning. And she had allowed herself just a few, drowsy moments of pleasure in Striker's embrace before reality had struck.

The water drummed on her skin and scalp and she washed quickly, dried and dressed. Then, she reached for her spongebag and pulled out the pills, swallowing them down with a palmful of water from the tap.

Finally, the headscarf. Her hair was still a little damp, but it didn't matter. With experienced and nimble fingers, she tied it around her head, and with it came a dejected sense of normality tinged with relief. And then as something as normal as air came beckoning to her from under the bathroom door. *Hunger.*

Bacon?

* * * * *

"How d'you like it?" Striker seemed to know she'd entered the kitchen, even with her back to her.

She was still dressed in her night clothes: her t-shirt cut high and loose enough to give an agonising glimpse of a backside as sculptured as the rest of her: the full swell of her breasts, the hipsters clutching the top of her thighs....

How do I like it? Morien's mouth was watering. "Um... as it comes?" she managed to splutter, sitting down at the table.

Striker turned her head. Her loose hair, tucked behind her ear, framed her face enough for Morien to see the arch of an eyebrow. Morien remembered the urge she had felt to draw her, paint her... the arch of that eyebrow, the curve of that cheekbone, the rose-petal lips moving....

"I hope bacon sandwiches are okay, but it was that or some green fluffy stuff that's growing in the refrigerator."

"Yes... yes, fine."

"And I can do coffee. Or Danny might have some tea...."

"Coffee's fine, thank you."

Morien continued to watch Striker, observe the way her hair flowed over her shoulders, the way that her body moved as she fried the bacon, buttered bread, brought a sneaky cigarette to her mouth from its resting place on the sill of the open window - her lips closing round it, sucking at it, her throat moving....

And something between epiphany and cold dread hit her between the eyes. It had been so long, the feeling felt alien. *Oh God, I think I'm...*

There was movement behind her, and then a god entered the room. He was tall, taller than Striker, with smooth soft skin the colour of coffee; short, silky dreadlocks framing his face like a lion's mane, and the face of an angel.

Morien found herself staring, and in a blinding moment of revelation, she completely understood Striker's attraction to this man.

"Hi," he said and grinned at her: a warm, friendly, welcoming grin.

If she'd had been straight....

"Morien... Danny... Danny... Morien," Striker said, flipping the bacon.

"Hi." Morien at last found her voice.

"Your guest gone?"

Danny smiled. "Yeah, she had to go early." He wandered over to Striker and, putting his arm

round her waist, gave her a loving peck on the lips. "Hey, sis, how're you doing?"

"I'm good, thanks." Striker looked up at Danny. And smiled. Morien could see her face glow with affection for this man.

She loved him.

And they made a stunning couple.

Danny's hand slid down and came to rest on Striker's bottom, and gave a tiny squeeze. And Morien's heart gave a regretful little twang in response. Danny's other hand darted into the pan to steal a slice of bacon.

"Hey!" Striker said, slapping his hand with the spatula she'd been using.

Danny dodged back, his mouth full, and gave Morien a conspiratorial wink. "You wouldn't deprive a starving man of his breakfast, would you, sis?"

"I will if he doesn't put any underwear on," Striker retorted.

Danny looked down at his unclad body. "Fair enough," he said. "Good to meet you," he said to Morien, and with another bite, he was gone as quickly as he'd come.

An apologetic look on her face, Striker placed a large bacon sandwich in front of Morien. "So, what are your plans now?"

Morien took a big bite, happy to get her mind from dwelling on what she'd just seen. Chewing thoughtfully, she finally said, "Phone the police, go to the flat, meet the forensics people, tidy up, get on with my life."

Striker played with her bacon sandwich. "Do you want some help?"

Yes. Please yes. "Don't you have to work?"

"Day off today. Back on days tomorrow. I'm yours if you want me."

Morien forgot to chew for a moment, as she looked up into Striker's eyes. *I want you. And I can't want you. You're straight.* She swallowed. "Well, we'll see how it goes." Striker looked down. She was playing with her food again. "But if you are free... maybe later?"

* * * * *

Morien was only waiting for Striker to get out of the shower before she left. She didn't want to leave the flat without saying thank you. Without ensuring that Striker know just how important

the night had been to her.

She sat on Striker's bed, her two bags in front of her, listening to the sound of splashing water from the bathroom. Her stomach was fluttering: aware at just how nervous she was at the impending day, and aware at just how much she didn't want to leave the sanctuary that Striker's apartment had become. And aware now how excitingly tense the American's presence was beginning to make her.

Then something caught her eye, a dark shadow peeking out from underneath the big bed. She reached down, half apprehensive and half hopeful of finding dirty underwear. Instead her hand hit something hard. She drew it out. It was a hardback book: the cover worn, the pages fingered, the corners of some folded as a marker. Carefully, she let the book fall open at one of these marked pages, and found an illustration, a colour plate of a beautiful woman, red-haired, pale-skinned, with a starling perched on her finger, ready to take flight. It was entitled 'Branwen, Daughter of Llyr'.

This was a treasure, as in this most impersonal of rooms, she knew she'd found something that was cherished by Striker, and an extraordinary key to this extraordinary woman. She held the book as if it were the most fragile of living things, as if it were Striker's heart.

The bathroom door opened and she heard Striker's voice. "Hey, Morien, I've been thinking. You don't want to take both bags on the Tube at this time of day. What if I brought one on later?" And then she was in the doorway, her hair dripping from the shower, her mouth open, looking as if she'd been more grateful if Morien had found soiled underwear. "Shit."

"You read *The Mabinogion*?!"

"Yeah, what about it?" Striker's attempt to be nonchalant was made unsuccessful by the slight blush playing along her cheekbones.

"I'm surprised, that's all. I'm sorry."

Striker looked at her, and at the way she was holding the book with a reverence she understood. Morien, she knew, would understand, as she'd known the moment she'd looked in her eyes.

Her voice was quiet, shy almost. "My mom used to read me stories when I was a kid, okay? She loved fairy stories, myths, legends, fantasy stuff. She read to me right up until... I guess stuff like that... it's always been..."

"Your escape?"

Striker nodded, then strode forward, dropping to the floor by Morien and heaving out a dilapidated suitcase from under the bed. She threw the lid open and Morien's eyes widened. Striker kept her life in a suitcase. It was full of books, paperbacks, hardbacks all of them obviously read and re-read: Grimm's fairytales, classical myths, a copy of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* barely able to stay within its covers, books of poetry, Tolkien. Morien grabbed a

dog-eared paperback and held it up to Striker's face with a grin. "Harry Potter?"

"Hey, don't knock it 'til you've read it," she said snatching it out of Morien's hand.

"I have read it. I've read all of them. Why do you keep them all hidden away like this?"

"Habit," Striker said. *Another habit.*

Morien didn't want to push but the look on her face must have asked a question.

"My dad always said it was stupid, that I'd end up with my head in the clouds, and when my mother left..." Striker sensed Morien's intake of breath, "...he would get so mad... he got rid of everything to do with her. And so I hid them. I guess I've hidden them ever since.

"Does Danny know you have them?"

Striker shrugged, "I don't know. I've never shown him. It's not something that would interest him." There was a shade of regret in her voice. "Besides, like everyone, he thinks of me as the big, strong, straight-thinking, down-to-earth type."

"But you aren't?"

"Oh, yeah, they're right, I am the big, strong, straight-thinking, down-to-earth type... I just like...."

"...to escape once in a while."

Striker smiled. "Just think of me as a closet fantasy transvestite."

Morien laughed, her eyes sparkling. "I can't get my head round that one," she said. Then paused. "Striker, are you close to your dad?"

Striker sighed. "'Was, for a while, when I was a kid. We used to do stuff together." An inexplicable, cheesy grin burst onto her face. "He taught me how to play baseball, I ended up playing Little League.... You get it...?"

Morien's face was blank.

"Little League baseball."

Morien's face was still blank.

"You know, big bat, hard ball, cool caps, Joe Di Maggio, except in miniature...."

"I know what Little League baseball is, I just don't get what I'm supposed to get."

"Striker!"

"I thought that was football...."

"I was a damn good pitcher...."

"So you didn't fall on your arse like Charlie Brown, so what?"

"Strike One... Strike Two...."

The penny dropped. "And that's why you're called Striker?"

"Bout time."

"So, what is your real name?"

Striker closed her eyes. "My 'real' name is Striker, that's the name I've gone by since I was ten."

And she'd closed off again. Morien felt disappointed, annoyed, at herself as much as Striker. "You're not going to tell me?" Striker didn't answer, just started putting books back in the suitcase. "Your mother named you, didn't she?"

Striker still said nothing, her head bent over her task. "Hey..." Morien's hand reached out and took the book from Striker's hand. Reverently, she opened the book. "Once upon a time there lived a King and a Queen, who lacked but one thing on earth to make them entirely happy," she said. A strange feeling of recognition. "Is this what you read to me?"

Striker suddenly looked shamefaced.

"Please, *please* don't feel embarrassed," Morien said. She caught Striker's hand and held on to it. "You don't know how much it meant to me."

"It did?" Striker's look was so anxious, Morien almost laughed. But she couldn't.

"Why did you do that? You had no reason...."

"You were alone," Striker interrupted her, at a rush to explain herself. "You didn't have anyone... and..." But how could she say those words now, now that she knew that Morien's affections lay elsewhere? She started again. "I know it helps to talk to coma patients, and the nurses in the ICU are pretty cool, but they're busy, you know? They wouldn't have had the time...."

"But you didn't need to do it, and you did. Thank you...." Morien knew that those two words would never be enough, and hoped that Striker knew that.

* * * * *

Morien felt like a infant in the outside world. This was a foreign area of London: the sounds, the sights, the people, everything about it seemed new, and Morien was keenly aware that Striker was not at her side. She clutched her bag closely, and headed for the Tube station.

She felt like a newborn... as if everything had changed. She wondered what was to come: would the phone calls continue now? Would the burglars return? Had they really been searching for something? Would she ever feel safe again?

And then there it was, that sweet kernel of security that had been planted in February, but had grown overnight, now tinged with regret at what she'd learnt. She had loved Striker for opening up to her, she had felt privileged with her trust. She would treasure the fact that this most secretive and private of women had confided in her.

She could feel herself falling gently in love with her. And there were so many reasons she couldn't allow herself to fall.

Striker was straight, that had been made obvious to her. Striker loved Danny, and Danny loved her. Morien didn't understand their relationship, it was obviously open, but there was a togetherness between them that couldn't... shouldn't be broken.

There was Sophie: her lovely, sweet Sophie. Sophie who had been her friend and lover for six years. How could she turn her back on six years?

Besides, how could someone like Striker, someone so exceptional, be attracted to her? *I mean, look at my life*, she almost said aloud. *A disaster area. Even my body's turned against me.*

She got to the station and bumped the holdall through the ticket barrier, grateful that she had taken Striker up on her offer and had only one bag to handle. She felt the familiar prickle of being watched, the burning surety that eyes were following her; the shiver down her spine. People were staring at her - the holdall bumping against her ankle. People were staring at her - she was a stranger in their land. People were staring at her - she shouldn't have come alone.

She made her way onto the train, sitting with the holdall on her lap, hugging it to herself - glancing round the carriage, but not making eye contact. It was busy. She was lucky to get a seat. Newspapers were rustled, books were studied, music was listened to behind the curtain of white noise, private conversations were murmured under the blanket of non-sound.

Morien hugged her little holdall.

There was a man standing near the central door of the carriage, staring at her. He looked away when her eyes came to rest on his face. He was big built, tall with broad shoulders and chest; dressed in jeans and a smart-casual shirt. He wore trainers, but they were clean, newly-bought. He looked as if he shouldn't be in casual clothes. His hair was crew cut, almost shaved, and dyed

a strange bleach-blond that didn't suit him. It made his skin look too pink, as if he was constantly agitated. There was something familiar about him.

Morien looked away, and she felt his eyes on her again.

She kept her eyes fixed on the advertisements above the seats opposite: air conditioning, cheap phone calls, a poem.

*The highway is full of big cars
going nowhere fast
And folks is smoking anything that'll burn
Some people wrap their lives round a cocktail glass
And you sit wondering
where you're going to turn
I got it.
Come. And be my baby.⁷*

She read and re-read and re-read until she had learnt it by heart.

A few more stations and she changed trains. Finally arriving at her local stop, she had walked down the high streets - the busy streets - even though it was the long route back.

She didn't see the blond man again.

But she felt his eyes on her all the way home.

* * * * *

Striker threw Morien's tapestry bag over her shoulder and slammed the apartment door behind her.

It had been two hours since Morien had left and the place felt empty without her, despite the volume of Danny's music. Striker had kept seeing her: sitting on the bed, at the kitchen table. That morning... with the sunlight dancing through the window, inviting beauty out of the dullest things. The grimy kitchen had even looked hospitable. She'd felt Morien's eyes on her, wondering what was behind those eyes, but afraid of what she might see had she turned round - especially after Danny's entrance. Striker had returned his kiss without thought, only realising as her lips left his what Morien might think. It was Danny; he was her friend, her occasional, former lover. But would Morien understand that?

She made her way down the familiar high street, to the Tube station, and launched herself into the nearest train, preferring to stand rather than sit. She took no notice of the people around her,

staring at the whirring blackness beyond the carriage doors.

She lost herself in thoughts of Morien as the darkness and the people came and went, in a world of her own which moved with her like a protective bubble as she changed trains and finally left the Underground system. Until she found herself making a decision.

This must end.

She would help Morien with her flat. She would make sure she was okay, that she was safe and secure. She would go home. Have a quiet evening in. Read some. Sleep. Then the day would be over, this whole confusing shit would be over and she could get on with her life. Her empty life.

After which, maybe she'd call Morien and ask her out on a date. An honest-to-goodness date.

And have the phone slammed down on her sorry ass.

This is nuts. This is....

A burly arm reached round her neck and hauled her into an alley.

Chapter 9: *My need, a knight*⁸

She was pressed up against a wall, the brickwork biting into the back of her skull.

"Gimme the bag," the man said.

He was heavy against her. Every inch as tall as Striker, he was barrel-chested, and he used his weight to pin her. His face was a breath away from hers, big and aggressive. His head was covered in a nondescript stubble. His thick chin was marked by a neat, goatee beard. He wore a thick, gold chain round his solid neck. His breath smelt of peppermint and smoke.

Morien's bag was trapped behind her. She couldn't have moved to give it to him, even if she'd wanted to. She didn't want to.

Striker looked him straight in his dark grey eyes. "Fuck you."

He slapped her hard across her face, again hitting her head against the bricks. She could taste blood in her mouth. Her cheek was blazing with the smack.

"Gimme the fucking bag, bitch."

He was used to getting what he wanted from women... whatever he wanted. He was hard against her. He was getting off on this, rubbing himself against her. She could feel him growing stiff

against her thigh. His hand was on her face now, holding it. She could feel fingerprints imbedding into her skin. He smiled. He'd had work done on his teeth - they were white, straight, sharp. "Want me to spoil this beautiful face of yours, cos I will."

His other hand was moving now, touching her body, squeezing a breast, running down her side to snake its way behind her, landing on a buttock. Squeezing it.

Silly boy...

Striker jerked a knee up, fast. The hit was not as brutal as she would have liked, but the man reeled back with surprise as much as pain. This gave her the space to punch him hard in the face and he landed on his knees on the alley floor. This time, in this alley, there was no compunction. She kicked him, hard, in the stomach, and then in the face - and she felt the satisfying crunch of bone beneath her boot.

He was crying with pain. But she was incensed now and she kicked him again, and he doubled over, bringing his knees up to his chest to protect himself. His hand flew to his waist. For a man built like a humvee he could move surprisingly quickly.

And Striker found herself at the wrong end of a gun.

It wasn't the first time she'd been in this position. She'd been around guns... both ends... several times. Once at St Vincent's, she had disarmed a young man threatening a receptionist with an old World War I pistol. But he had been nervous, scared even, easy to talk down, easy to out-think.

This guy was neither - and he was furious.

He spoke slowly, his voice sodden with blood and mucus. "STOP *fucking* kicking me!"

Striker took a step back. The man's hand was shaking, but he held the gun with the confidence of familiarity. "Okay," she said, her voice trying to stay calm, to keep him calm. "I'm sorry... okay."

With difficulty, he got to his feet, but the gun didn't move from its aim. She could see his finger edgy on the trigger.

"Now give me the fucking bag."

Striker didn't hesitate to swing Morien's bag off her shoulder. She dropped it on the ground. He followed, again bending painfully to open it, but the gun remained aimed at her. His free hand rifled through the contents, and brought out a ring binder, emblazoned with a council crest.

Then he stood, leaving the bag on the ground, and moved towards her. "As for you..." Striker found herself on her knees, as he kicked her feet from under her. The man was wearing shoes, casual, but polished. His jeans had dirt all up one leg. The imprint of her own boot was clear on his sweatshirt. The gun came down and the barrel was pressed against her forehead. She closed

her eyes. The pressure was cold and sharp against her skull, as if the bullet was biting already.

Please, she wanted to say, please. I haven't found my mother yet. I want Morien. Please, I want Morien.

And then there were worried voices on the other side of the wall. "Is there anyone there?" someone called. The man's eyes darted at the sound. He came close to her, his breath hot on her face, his words accompanied by bodily fluids, and whispered. "I'll fucking get you." He took her face in his big hand and slammed her head back against the wall. For a moment, she saw nothing but a burst of stars, and when she opened her eyes again he was gone.

The voices were still there, coming closer. The thought of intruding strangers suddenly made her sick and, lunging for the bag, she stumbled out of the alley.

* * * * *

Morien had spent half the morning on the phone: the police - to check the arrival of their forensic team; the landlord - to arrange for a new lock on her front door; her insurance company - just pausing to let in a single forensic officer in an overgrown romper suit. Now she was talking to her sister-in-law.

"Kerensa, I'm fine, I promise. Tell Drake to stop worrying. The policeman said it was a simple burglary. It's over. Everything's all right."

She sighed. Her brother had apparently tried to phone her last night. Concerned when neither she nor her answerphone picked up, he had tried her at work that morning, only to be told she was off sick. Then busy with classes, Drake had given his wife strict instruction to ensure Morien's health and safety. She couldn't blame him for his paranoia. Not after what had happened.

"I stayed with a friend last night, that's all. No... no... you don't have to come round. My friend is helping me out."

She glanced up as a noise distracted her. And the breath caught in her throat. Striker stood in the doorway, leaning against the door frame. Her face was marked with dirty, red streaks, and there was blood trickling from her mouth.

"Oh my God.... Kerensa, I've got to go." She put the phone down and bolted up from the sofa. "What happened?"

Striker stepped forward, swaying a little, tossing Morien's bag onto the floor. "I'm okay, really."

Morien reached up to touch Striker's face. "This is okay?"

"You should see the other guy." She smiled. Then winced.

"Striker..." She took the American's arm and steered her to the sofa. Then darted into the kitchen.

Striker put her head back on the sofa. She owed her the truth. "I was attacked, okay?"

"Mugged?"

"This was no ordinary mugging."

Morien appeared in the doorway with a soft cloth and a bowl of warm water. "What do you mean?"

Striker looked at Morien as she sat down beside her. "You still have your bag, I still have my wallet."

"Then what...?"

"You had a ring binder in your bag?"

The phone rang.

Morien picked it up, unthinkingly, her eyes still fixed on Striker. "Hello?" She closed her eyes. "Iesu Grist. Drake, I can't talk to you right now. I'm fine. Yes, I was burgled. I'm fine. I *can't* talk you right now. Don't you have classes to teach? Then go and eat lunch then. I promise I'll call you later." She put the phone down.

Striker's eyes were closed now. There were what looked like fingerprints on her face. Morien reached up with the damp cloth and, as gently as gossamer, tried to clean the blood from around Striker's mouth.

Striker flinched at the touch, but then allowed herself to be tended.

"You said they took my ring binder?"

Striker nodded. Her eyes fluttered open. "What was in it?"

Morien's hand fell into her lap. "My work. Work I'm doing on the Woodhall Estate project. My Tumblety Street proposal." Her mind was whirling. None of this made sense.

"Anything that anyone would be interested in?"

"Nothing. A few well-known details about the Woodhall Estate..."

"And what about your proposal?"

"I told you. Just a plan to renovate the houses, develop the warehouses and turn a little disused chapel into a community centre and art gallery, that's all."

"Everyone's a critic."

Morien smiled a weak smile, then ran a hand across her forehead, displacing her headscarf and allow a few wisps of auburn hair to escape. "I don't know what's happening. I'm so sorry, Striker. Look at you. This shouldn't be happening to you."

"This shouldn't be happening to *you*," Striker returned. Tentatively, she reached out for Morien's hand and held it softly in her own. "Can you think of *any* reason why anyone would be after your work?"

"There's been problems on the Woodhall Estate. Most of the community are behind the regeneration project, but there was a lot of crime there... there still might be people.... Oh, God, Striker... there're names in that binder. Community leaders who have been helping us. But I thought they were well known. And why me? There's a dozen people in my office working on that project. Why me?" And again she felt the tears well. "I can't stand this. I can't stand this anymore."

Striker put an arm round her and drew her into a hug, just wanting to hold Morien. Somehow, concentrating on Morien's fear stilled her own. Somehow, the incident in the alley didn't seem so terrifying with Morien in arms. "Hey," she said, "if they've got your work, then they've got what they want. They won't bother us again."

"I ought to call the police. *You* ought to call the police," Morien mumbled into Striker's jacket.

"I'm fine, honey. I've had far worse in my life." Physically, she had. Mentally.... Mentally, she'd be feeling that gun for a long time. She'd be feeling that terror. But she wouldn't show Morien. She pushed Morien back so she could see her face. "Do you want to phone the cops?"

Morien didn't answer for a long time. Striker watched the expressions wax and wane on her face. She was like an open book and Striker followed the story with the fascination of a devoted reader. Finally, Morien opened her mouth. "No, I don't. I just want the whole thing to be over with." She sighed. "How about you? You were the one that was attacked."

"You're kidding? With my luck, Manifold'll say I beat myself up." She smiled weakly. "So it's over with, as of now." She got up, stiffly, and stretched her back. Then stripped off her jacket. "All we have to do is tidy up in here."

"Striker...."

"Yeah?" She looked back at Morien, surprised at the smile on her face.

"...did you just call me 'honey'?"

Striker caught herself blushing. "Shit. That's not gonna do a thing for my bad girl rep, is it?"

"Don't worry, bad girl, I won't tell anyone." Her smile faded. "It is over, isn't it?"

"It's over, or these guys are going to have to answer to me."

* * * * *

Stalker's paradise.

Morien's life was scattered everywhere, and Striker had free-rein. She arranged the eclectic CD collection, organised video cassettes, folded clothes, lost herself in books. And all accompanied by a dialogue of chat and banter: some resulting in laughter, some resulting in a shaky breath and a reassuring touch of hand on hand.

Now she was pondering photographs. She had rescued them from their broken frames and was collecting them into a neat, respectful pile. These were places that meant a lot to Morien, people who cared for her, people she loved.... Her stomach turned over.

They were standing in front of a gate, a garden with flowers behind, and the wall of a house in the background, covered in the green and pink of a climbing plant. Morien somehow looked less fragile, less thin, her auburn hair loose around her face and longer, resting on her shoulders. Her eyes were bright - she was laughing - and seemed to be struggling to hold onto a white cat in her arms.

Sophie was a little taller than Morien, dark haired and with dark, sparkling eyes, although Striker couldn't tell exactly what colour they were. Her skin was tanned. Her hair was neat and short-cropped. She was frustratingly pretty. She had her arm round Morien and was smiling brightly; the kind of smile that made her pretty face even more beautiful.

Striker swallowed the rising gall of jealousy as she stared at the picture.

"What?"

Morien was staring at her. She forced a smile. "Nothing, just looking." She placed the photographs in the extended hand.

Morien smiled in return, studying the picture at the top of the pile. But Striker couldn't help noticing the smile turning wistful. "Last summer," Morien murmured. "A lot's happened since then." She slid the photos into a drawer, keeping any remaining thoughts to herself.

But Striker had to know. "How... how long have you two been together?" She tried to make the question sound nonchalant, a matter of casual interest, and followed it up with another smile. She hurt inside.

"Six years," Morien said, simply. It felt strange talking about this with Striker. She didn't look at her.

"How did you meet?"

"At university." Then feeling the need for explanation: "We were friends at first... then things kind of developed afterwards." She finally looked round at Striker, taken aback by the dark blue interest in her eyes. She smiled, shyly. "It's funny. I never would have thought we'd make a couple. She... she had a boyfriend before me, although I know I wasn't her first...."

She trailed off, and Striker couldn't help commenting, "Even Sappho was married."

The Welsh woman lifted an annoyed auburn eyebrow at the observation, and Striker took on an expression of mock contrition. The silent, upbeat exchange seemed to give Morien confidence, and she went on. "Sophie was always the life and soul of the party. Everyone liked her. She always had... has time for everyone, you know? I was the quiet one who actually got on with studying."

Striker's smile briefly became genuine. She could imagine Morien: earnest, determined, passionate about her work.

"We got together at our graduation party." She chuckled. "I'm sure the wine helped that night. And neither of us ever planned on it being anything more than a one-night stand. But...."

"It turned into a whole lot more."

"It turned into a life." There was a softness in Morien's green eyes that ran Striker through.

For a moment, she floundered in silence until, at last, she spoke, her voice quiet to disguise its shaking. "You must miss her very much."

Morien looked away, closed the drawer.

She couldn't answer that question.

It took a while for either of them to speak again, both concentrating on the task at hand. At last, Morien glanced over to where Striker was wrestling with the vacuum cleaner as if it was a seven-headed hydra. Her lip was slightly swollen and there were still the red shadows of slap marks on her cheek. *My hero... my friend.*

Even Sappho was married. What was that supposed to mean? It only seemed to confirm that Striker was straight. She sighed. Friends then.

"It's been a long time since I had a friend."

She hadn't meant to say that, it had slipped off her tongue as quickly as it had slipped into her mind.

Striker's head jerk up, surprise and puzzlement on her face, and she momentarily abandoned the cleaner. Morien felt the need to explain pushing up inside her. "I mean... all the people we used to go out with, socialise with, you know? They were Sophie's friends. It always felt like they were *our* friends, but I've barely seen any of them since Sophie went away. And since I got out of hospital... well, I haven't wanted to see any of them. I get so tired," she finished lamely.

Striker didn't say anything, but there was a quiet encouragement in her eyes.

"It's hard to get close to people, you know?" Morien continued. Striker lowered her eyes briefly, but there was a smile of acknowledgement on her lips. "How can you get close to people when you don't even understand yourself?"

Their eyes locked for a moment, but then Morien looked away. "You're lucky to have Danny."

"I am," Striker spoke with a sigh, "very lucky. I'm not sure if anyone else would have put up with me, the way he has."

"You love him," Morien said, her voice surprisingly strong.

"Yes, I do. But..." What could she say now? *I love you too. I love you more.* "There's love and love, you know?"

"Yes, I know."

They smiled, and for a moment Morien was lost in a pool of cerulean blue, but was then shocked out of her reverie.

"Do you... want to come out with me tonight?"

"Sorry?"

"Hey, no big deal. Just two friends going out."

"Out where?"

"There's a club I know... Danny works there, but I don't know if he's got a set tonight."

A club? "I don't know...."

"It's okay if you don't want to. I just thought... maybe a drink or two, listen to the music. You don't have to dance or anything. And it won't be late... I'm working tomorrow."

Morien hesitated. She was torn in two. She wanted... *really* wanted... to go out with Striker. It

had occurred to her that with the ending of the horrors of the past few days, Striker would go too. It felt as if their friendship was on borrowed time. At some point, something would finish it and Striker would suddenly vanish in a flurry of pumpkins and white mice.

So the chance to extend this time with her was more than welcome.

But a club. That scared her.

The noise, the lights, the heat, the buzz of alcohol. God, she'd forgotten what that was like. And Striker, the thought of Striker there, the thought of Striker dancing - her body moving. She didn't know how it would effect her. Any of it.

Morien rubbed her eyes.

"It's okay," Striker said. "We don't have to do anything you don't want to."

"No." The vehemence of Morien's response surprised her as much as Striker. *It's time I stopped being scared.* "It's time I had some fun."

* * * * *

It was still light as they walked to The Boom Shack, and the sounds of the outside world still had precedence down the high street. But in its small back street, the Boom was already nestling in cosy shadow.

Striker could barely contain her joy. The short walk from her apartment to the Boom had been one of the proudest of her life: simply because she had Morien on her arm. Well, not on her arm. She had walked demurely at her side, interested in her surroundings, interested in Striker's comments. But not touching. Not touching.

Not that Striker didn't want to touch. Morien had walked bashfully out of her bedroom wearing the flowing, blue-green dress, her face demurely made up, and all topped off by a long, embroidered headscarf that made her look like a pre-Raphaelite model. And ever since Striker had wanted to touch, if only to run the diaphanous material through her fingers.

"Is it too much?" Morien had asked, shyly, misunderstanding Striker's wide-eyed stare.

Striker had opened and closed her mouth a couple of times, but eventually said, "No... no... not at all. It's... pretty."

Pretty? *Pretty?!!* Was Helen of Troy pretty? Was Blodeuwedd pretty? Was Guinevere pretty? Striker wondered if it would be overly dramatic to make up for her mistake by prostrating herself at Morien's feet.

Instead, they'd made their way back to Striker's apartment where she had washed and changed as quickly as she could - black jeans, clean cream t-shirt, her other boots: smart... for her, not only bothering to braid her hair - only so she needn't be out of Morien's awe-inspiring presence for too long.

And now, as they turned into the alley, she felt like an Elizabethan love poet bursting with sonnets of adoration and lapdog hope.

In the lazy neon of the Boom Shack light were Thomas and Pully, one on either side of the entrance, smoking, relaxing. Pully looked round and saw them through a haze of smoke and pink light. "Lawd have mercy, sis," he said, flashing his gold tooth, "you really know where to find 'em."

"Lawd have mercy on you, Lil' Pully, if I catch you anywhere near her," Striker retorted, smiling.

It was Thomas who remembered his manners. He reached out and took Morien's hand in a gentle grip, and Morien looked up and up and up to greet his wide smile. "Welcome to the Boom Shack, little lady. My name is Thomas, and any friend of Striker's is a friend of mine. I hope you have a fine evening."

"Thank you," Morien replied quietly.

She was feeling nervous.

She had been feeling nervous from the moment she stepped into her bedroom to change. It had been frightening just how much she had wanted to impress Striker. She'd even put on a little eye make-up. And it had been frightening seeing the look of pure longing on Striker's face as she had finally emerged. *That wasn't longing*, she said to herself. *She's straight, she's straight, she's straight.... Please let her be straight.* And then she'd changed her mind when Striker had changed to the black jeans that showcased every inch of her long, long legs.

And for a moment she had thought about throwing caution to the wind, throwing Sophie over, and leaping on Striker then and there.

But the possible repercussions of that had been even more frightening.

So, she was here in this gloomy alley, shaking hands with a giant.

"Come on," Striker said, daring to touch Morien's arm, just for moment. The material shimmered on her fingertips. It tingled through her nerves.

The two of them walked through the shady entrance.

It was dark inside as well. It was like walking into the mouth of a dragon: red and dark and smoky. But with relief, Morien realised it wasn't as loud as she'd feared, and the lights stayed

constant. Striker steered her over to the bar. "The first set isn't 'til nine so they pipe in the recorded stuff 'til then."

It was dub music, loud enough for a few couples to be dancing, but quiet enough to sustain a conversation away from the dancefloor. They sat themselves at one end of the bar, out of the way, but in a position to watch the rest of the club, the dancefloor, and the stage.

"Beer, please, Viv," Striker said, making herself at home. "What would you like?"

Morien considered for a moment, regarding the assortment of bottles ranged behind the bar, and the brightly coloured liquids within. "An orange juice, please."

"An orange juice?"

"Yes please."

She wondered if Striker would protest, preparing herself for "But surely..." or "Don't you want..." or "Come on, a little one...." But Striker turned to the barman and said, "An orange juice, please." She turned back to Morien. "I'm glad you decided to come." Striker's eyes were shining like stars in the dim night of the Boom.

"I'm glad I decided to come." Striker's enthusiasm was infectious, and Morien found herself sinking into her surroundings with an ease that belied her previous tension. Or maybe it was because she felt at ease around Striker. She enjoyed her company, she enjoyed the conversation, she enjoyed the way that when she and Striker talked it was as if nothing else in the world existed. They could have been back at the flat, or on a desert island, or on a Welsh hillside. She liked the way Striker listened to her, the way her eyes would change colour in the space of a heartbeat from serious to teasing to caring, from blue Arctic sky to dark summer night. She liked her mouth, the way it curved into a smile when she was amused, the way it encircled her cigarette, the way her lips pursed as she exhaled the smoke - so carefully blown away from Morien - as if she was kissing the air.

They talked of music and books and art, and were completely oblivious to their surroundings, as the club began to fill with patrons. Only the barman's occasional interventions to refill their glasses detracted from their world of two.

Striker's cheeks were beginning to glow with alcohol and pleasure. She started to shrug off her jacket, only for it to be pulled off her shoulders and replaced by an arm. "Let me help you with that," said a sultry voice.

Striker started and looked round at the face of the pretty blonde that had appeared from nowhere. "Oh, hi Diane," she said, uncomfortably.

"Wanna little fun later, if you're free?" the blonde said speaking low into Striker's ear, but loud enough for Morien to hear. Morien could see the woman's tongue moving in her mouth. Another inch and it'd be in Striker's ear.

"No, Diane, I'm with someone," Striker said, loudly, so Diane could make no mistake about her answer. And she took her jacket from Diane's grasp and put it back on.

Diane's cheek twitched as if she'd been slapped. She glanced at Morien, looking at her as if she was last year's fashion. But then she turned back to Striker and the smile returned. "Well," she said, "maybe another time, gorgeous." And she slunk back into the crowd to find someone else's space to invade.

Striker stubbed out her cigarette with frustration. "Sorry," she said. "We had a... thing. Once. Ages ago." She looked up and found Morien staring at her, her mouth open.

The filing cards of Morien's memory had exploded in her head and now lay in disorganised clutter on the floor of her mind. Propriety dictated that she should brush the encounter off. Propriety dictated that she should take up the reins of their former conversation. Propriety dictated that she shouldn't question her new friend's choice of sexual partner.

Propriety could go to hell.

"I... I... I... thought you were straight?"

"I never said I was straight."

"But what about you and Danny?"

"Yeah, Danny and I have... slept together... but that doesn't make me straight."

"You're gay, then?"

"No, I'm just me... and I *don't* like being labelled." There was a confrontational tone in Striker's voice that seemed totally alien.

"What does that mean?"

"It means that if I want someone, I fuck them." There was a glint in Striker's eye that was new again from all the shades and sparkles Morien had witnessed since the evening began. It was dark, dangerous, deeply passionate and frighteningly desirable.

And Morien was taken in by it, sucked in to the depths of the blue and the depths of Striker's challenge.

She took up the gauntlet. "Do you want to fuck me?"

Morien was joking.

The use of the expletive on the small woman's lips was like a cold shower... or a hot bath. Never

had a single word caused so much pleasurable uncertainty for Striker. Morien's voice had taken on a teasing, sensuous tone, a warm, wet tone that brought to mind bodies slipping together and the musky smell of sex. And with her Welsh tongue toying with the words....

She was joking, wasn't she?

Except it didn't seem like a joke. "No," Striker said quietly, and was totally unprepared for the look of hurt that crossed Morien's face.

"Irie, sisters and brothers. My name's Fabio and, for those of you who don't know, this joint is mine. And I say time for the good stuff. We got rockers, we got dub, but first we got bredda DJ Just."

And simultaneously the music started pounding, the bodies around them moved fast and hard, and the lights began to flash.

And Morien felt her knees almost give way. "I've got to get out of here."

Striker saw Morien's mouth move under the music, and saw her turn and begin to push her way through the crowd. She saw her put her hand to her eyes, almost running blind from the room.

* * * * *

Morien made it outside, the music, the lights, the heat pounding in her brain. But the darkening evening only offered humidity and the flashing neon BOOM SHA.

This couldn't be happening. She couldn't let this happen. Not here. Not with Striker on her heels. *I hate this. I hate this. This can't happen. Not in front of....*

"Hey, little lady," a voice said through the white noise in front of her eyes. "You okay?"

"I need some... some fresh air."

It was Thomas. His big hands took her by the arms and gently pulled her away from the entrance. "Don't worry, lady, I got you."

Morien swayed in the direction of the street, but Thomas's strong grip pulled her back. "Not out on the street. You go up the other end, there's some boxes up there. You go sit tight. I'll keep an eye out for you. You wan' me get Striker?"

Morien shook her head and stumbled down to the end of the alley. It was even darker down here, pitch when it formed an L shape and she found herself almost tripping over a pile of wooden crates, set up as if they were hidden thrones. She sat down heavily, thought to put her head between her legs, but felt her body fall.

* * * * *

Striker had tried to follow Morien, but the smaller woman was quicker and more desperate, and Striker found herself colliding, almost dancing, with an agile woman in front of her. She looked into the woman's face - they were strangely familiar - beautiful, deep almond eyes smiling at her. Then the woman pushed past with a mouthed apology.

Striker turned again, anxious that she had hurt Morien, worried that Morien might be unwell, and again started to push past the dancing mass. And again found her way blocked. Arms came up and grabbed her waist.

"Hey, sis, what's the hurry?"

"Danny." She breathed easier. "Bro, have you seen Morien?"

"That little red head? Sorry, sis, been otherwise engaged." Danny smiled and nodded his head in the direction of the Asian woman.

Striker stared after her as she disappeared towards the Ladies. "Is it my imagination or is that the same girl as last weekend?"

Danny shrugged. "I didn't think you noticed last weekend."

"Bro... you got something to tell me?"

"She's nice."

"She'd better be for you." Finding themselves on the edge of the seething crowd, Striker pulled a cigarette and lit it with shaking fingers. "There's going to be a lot of devastated ladies here when the news breaks."

"The devastated ladies will have you to look after them, sis," Danny grinned back.

"No they won't."

"They won't?" Danny's face became concerned, regarding Striker's cheerless expression. "What's up, sis?"

"Nothing. Just fucked up again. The usual."

"Fucked up?"

"It's nothing. Nothing I can't fix. I hope."

"Strike, you're okay with this... with me, aren't you?"

Striker looked at him, concentrating on his words now. "Dan, of course I am!" She took his hand. "You don't need my permission to start dating someone. Besides, I'm happy for you. I really want this to work for you." She kissed him gently on the lips. The most chaste of kisses. "You're my friend."

Danny squeezed her hand, and his grin appeared again like sunrise. "So, you and the little red head...?"

Striker sighed. "Me and the little red head."

"Well, you and her... last night... is she a real red head?"

Striker threw him a look of disgust. "Nothing happened."

"Nothing happened?"

"Nothing happened."

"You mean you had that cute little catty in your bed all night and you didn't get to stroke the..."

"Nothing happened."

Danny's voice rose above the music, causing stares from their neighbours. "I don't believe it. The great Striker West struck out!"

There was a pause. Striker looked up at him, exhaling smoke at him like a demon at hell's gate. "Firstly," she said, "don't you dare use one of my own phrases against me and secondly, asshole, Striker West chose not to go up to the plate."

"Chill out, sis. You didn't make a move?" Striker shook her head. "Shit," Danny said. "We both got it bad."

"My friend, we certainly do."

* * * * *

The latest patrons dispatched, Thomas left Paully to mind the door, and made his way into the dark part of the alley. He didn't see Morien immediately, despite his eyes being used to the gloom. Approaching the crates he almost tripped over her. She was sitting up against the wall, her head on her knees, her arms clutched round her bent legs.

"Coo yah, sis, I almost didn't see you there," he said, crouching down by her side. "You sick, sweetheart?"

She lifted her head from her knees and her face was almost luminous white in the dark. She was crying. The make-up she'd so carefully applied just a couple of hours before, ran down her cheeks in black streams. "Hey, little lady, I'll get Striker for you, 'kay?"

"No!" She reached out and caught his arm as he started to get up. "No, please. I just want to go home."

"Okay," Thomas said. "How 'bout if I get you a cab, huh?" She nodded. "Can you stand? Here, let me help you." He almost lifted her to her feet, holding onto her shoulder as she trembled. "There's a rank just round the corner. Can I walk you?" He held out an arm, and she took it with a small, grateful smile.

"Thank you," she said, in a tiny voice.

"My pleasure, sister," he said, and walked her slowly up the alley.

As they passed the entrance to the Boom Shack, Thomas winked at the staring Pully and said, "Back in a minute, dread, hold tight." And they walked off into the street.

Pully gaped after them, the two figures, one towering and sturdy, one small and fragile, silhouetted against the streetlamps of the outside world. They rounded the corner and were out of sight.

He took a saved joint from his shirt pocket and lit it carefully, encouraging the glow of the tip with long inhalations. Then leaned back against the brickwork and closed his eyes, his tongue absent-mindedly playing with his gold tooth, becoming one with the music and the night.

A minute or so of delicious reverie passed until an urgent voice said, "Hey, Pully, you seen my friend."

Pully opened his eyes and gazed up at Striker rather unsteadily.

"Wha...?"

"Fuck, shorty, have you seen my friend, the woman I came with?"

"Oh, yeah, Thomas took her to get a cab. She looked like shit, Strike."

"What do you mean she looked like shit?"

"She looked ill, sis. I think she fainted."

"Fucking shit, Pully, why didn't someone come and get me?" Striker darted out of the entrance,

looking as if she wanted to hit someone. Pully had a sneaking suspicion it was going to be him.

"I dunno. Thomas looked like he was handling it. They've only just gone. They might still be up at the rank."

Striker was off without replying, up the alley. But her movement was brought to a shuddering halt as a group of men blocked the exit to the street.

It wouldn't have mattered to her. She would have simply pushed past them - despite the size of the group: a group of pale-faced, skinheaded freaks who looked like ghouls out of the night. And despite the size of the men. The two suited bodies that led them blocked the alley between them.

In another life, at another time, she would have pushed past them with a momentary smirk: one had a bleached-blond crew cut, that made his face look far too red. The other had his nose bandaged and two black eyes.

It was this man who stopped her. In a voice that made him sound as if he had a bad cold, he said, "Well well. Two birds with one stone."

Continued in Chapter 10....

¹ "If we shadows have offended..." - the beginning of Puck's farewell to the audience in Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

² Gwyrionyn = Idiot

³ "...reit, dda. A chdi?" = "...fine, thanks. And you?"

⁴ "Dw i'n iawn!" = "I'm *fine*!"

⁵ Reference to the poem "Truth" by Stephen Crane.

⁶ The title of a love poem by Carol Ann Duffy.

⁷ "Come. And Be My Baby" by Maya Angelou. And yes, it has appeared on London Underground trains.

⁸ Words spoken by Lynette to King Arthur from "Gareth and Lynette" in Alfred, Lord Tennyson's *Idylls of the King*.

The Athenaeum's Scroll Archive

~ Misplaced People ~

by Devize

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Chapter 10: Attercop¹

The men moved down the alley like a tidal wave. Striker found herself forced against the wall; pinned, much as she had been that morning. There were flashes of metal in the surge - as if silent guns were already blazing. But it was more than that, other metal forms swung against legs, peeked from under coats. Under the smell of sweat and cigarettes, she could smell gasoline.

It was the blond who gave the orders. "Go inside, find the owners. You know what to do." He turned his attention to Pully who was standing in the Boom's entrance like an unarmed David in front of the entire Philistine army. "Where's your big black friend?" Pully said nothing. He stood foursquare in the doorway, challenging anyone to make him move. "Look, arsehole, you ain't got much choice here...."

"Pully, do as he says, they're packing," Striker cried out before a big, thick hand was slammed over her mouth. Pully didn't move.

"Christ, someone do something with this shortarse git. Just get rid of him if he's going to make trouble."

Two skinheads hauled Pully out of the doorway, dragging him, kicking and yelling, down the alley and out into the street. The other acolytes swarmed into the interior to find victims among the unsuspecting dancers.

The blond man turned round and came to stand in front of Striker. "Fancy meeting you here," he said. "I believe my brother's got something to say to you."

The bearded man's huge fist crashed into Striker's stomach. She doubled-over, tears blurring her eyes, then gravity pulled her onto all fours. But she didn't have a moment to breath. The blond man grabbed her hair and pulled her head back sharply.

"Let's make this civilised shall we? Start off with some introductions? My name is Nigel. This is my brother, Bruce."

Nigel and Bruce? Since when were gangsters called Nigel and...?

"Don't even think about it," he continued. "Now, we know you're a friend of the Welsh dyke, but we haven't caught your name."

Striker bit her bottom lip, tried to struggle free, but the more she struggled the tighter his grip became on her hair.

"Don't be fucking stupid. What's your name?"

"Striker...", she said through gritted teeth. He pulled her head back again and put a hand on her throat. "Striker West."

Nigel looked at her, amusement on his pink face. "Striker? Shit, didn't your parents like you or something?" Striker's eyes widened and she tried to move her legs but they seemed frozen beneath her.

Then the music radiating from the Boom Shack suddenly silenced. Striker could hear the sound of screams inside, then a gunshot. *Jesus, please let Danny be safe. Please let him be safe.* Nigel didn't blink.

She was frightened and Nigel could see that. He could see fear oozing out of every pore. He smiled. "Now, Striker, my brother told me what you did to him." He was close now, his voice hissing in her ear. "And you hurt my brother, you hurt me, you understand?"

He pulled her hair again, and Striker nodded.

Nigel sat back on his heels, but keeping a tight grip on her scalp. "Now, me and my brother, we don't have a prejudiced bone between us. I mean, blacks, yids, queers - not a problem. You show me a queer, black Jew and I'll shake 'im by the hand, yeah?"

Striker wasn't sure if she was supposed to respond. She was tempted to garner the bile that was pooling in her mouth and spit it into the bastard's nasty, pink face, but instead she simply glared at him.

"But, dykes," he continued, "I don't get 'em, you know? Makes me want to give 'em a taste of what they're missing, if you know what I mean."

"But, I..."

"Don't interrupt." His voice was calm, but he tugged Striker's hair back so hard her head crashed against the wall. *What the hell was it with these two and walls? Since when was brickwork an offensive weapon?*

"Now, we're reasonable guys, really. We don't hurt people just for the hell of it. But you and your taff bint, you've been pissing us off. You've been pissing my family off. It's been fucking hard trying to stop my uncle from paying a visit to your little girlfriend, and he's not nearly as nice as us. But, you just won't be told, will you?"

He paused. His grip tightened on her hair. Then loosened again. He almost let go.

"But, like I said, we're reasonable guys. Now, while we were down the doctor's, me and Bruce had a think about what would be the best thing to do with you, Striker, and we've decided to teach you a little lesson, and leave you a little gift that I hope will remind you of that lesson. It's

very simple. All you have to do is remember to keep your nose out of our business. Do you understand?"

Striker nodded.

"And you will explain this to that pretty little girlfriend of yours, won't you? Because, and keep this in mind, bitch, we know where she lives."

"You bastard..." Striker struggled in his grip, suddenly terrified for Morien.

"Oi," he replied. "I warned you..." And everything went black.

* * * * *

It took Striker a while to recognise her surroundings when she finally opened her eyes. And when she did recognise them, it took a moment to believe it.

She was only round the corner from The Boom Shack. It was a little passageway she'd passed a hundred times and barely glanced at, only a couple of stores away from the Boom's alley.

The night sky seemed to be flashing with colours: blues and reds. She could smell rotting vegetables... and smoke. The air stank of smoke and it clawed at her throat.

She sat slumped against the wall, one side resting on an trashcan overflowing with restaurant debris. Her entire body ached. Especially her stomach. Especially her head. She took the time to check herself: and despite the aching there didn't seem to be anything broken, only bruised. The pain, she guessed, was simply a result of the treatment she'd received while conscious. Then she had a thought that made her nauseous. *A taste of what they're missing....*

She moved a shaking hand down over her body, allowing it to rest above her pelvis, then down. Her jeans were fastened. There was no specific soreness, no indication that they'd... *Thank fuck.* She let out a shaky breath, then rose unsteadily to her feet, groaning as each muscle protested.

She still wore her leather jacket. She could feel her wallet in her jeans pocket, pressing against her thigh. She reassured herself that her house keys were jingling in the jacket's inner pocket. She could feel the outline of her cigarette packet through the lining, her lighter nestling beside it. She wondered whether to light one, but her throat felt raw and even the call of nicotine would have to wait for its answer until she'd had a drink of something cold. She glanced at her watch, still on her wrist. *11.40 p.m.?! She'd been out that long? Jesus, what had they done to her...?*

She ran her fingers through her dishevelled hair and winced and swore under her breath as they brushed a lump the size of an egg on the back of her head.

Other than that, there was nothing... *nothing...* that seemed different. She didn't understand, but

decided not to brood over her good luck and having got away with a relatively light beating, and stumbled out of the passageway into the main street.

There were police cars parked opposite the Boom Shack alley, a couple of ambulances, and behind them looming fire engines. Dazed and dishevelled clubbers were standing in small groups on the pavement. Firefighters were rolling up hoses, packing up. Ambulance crewmembers were providing blankets and oxygen. The police punctuated the scene, talking to witnesses, consulting with each other. She held back, staying in the shadows, worried about being seen talking to the cops. She thought of Morien and the threat the brothers had made.

Now, more than ever, she felt like Morien's protector, Morien's knight - she held Morien's wellbeing in her hands and she could only shelter her by being silent.

At least Morien had missed this. At least, by some miracle, they hadn't known she was here.

Here and there on the street would be a face Striker recognised - Viv the barman; Diane, latched on to some naïve young man. But no Danny. Her heart lurched. And then she saw the unmistakable figure of Thomas lingering as close to the alley as he could, then turn and begin to walk in her direction.

"Thomas!" she called as loudly as she dared.

His head snapped round and his eyes widened as he saw Striker. He hurried over and wrapped her in a bear hug. "Sis...", he said, "Oh sis..." And Striker felt a sob riding through his big body.

"What happened, Thomas, what happened?" she whispered into his ear.

He pulled free of her, keeping his hands on her shoulders. "They took over the club, sis. Bad men threatened them with guns. Took Ray and Fabio. Ray's in hospital now. Then they heard the feds coming and the doghearts got out. But they poured gas all over, and set fire to it. I think we got everyone out, they're searching for... for anybody left, but the Boom's gone, sis. The Boom Shack's gone."

"Thomas..." She couldn't say anything more for a moment, her throat working round the sorrow and disgust that was choking her. "Who called the cops?" Her mind perched on the question, almost as a way of avoiding her other concern.

"I called them, sis," he sighed. Striker had never seen him so tired. "I came back from seeing your lady off..."

"She's okay?"

"She was sick, sis, but she'd gone before they came. I saw them go in. I heard them threatening you. I saw them take Lil' Pully, I saw them take you, I tried to get into the club, but they had guns.... They were spreading petrol everywhere, Strike. There was nothing I could do... so I went for the nearest phone and called the feds."

"Thomas, did Danny get out?"

"Yeah, he did. I saw him not long ago with one of his cattles. He's gone to take care of her, I guess." He gave a little smile that didn't reach his eyes. "But the doghearts took you. Are you okay, Strike?"

"I'm fine. I think. They knocked me out, that's all."

"And Pully, sis. Have you seen Pully?"

* * * * *

The anxiety in Thomas's eyes haunted Striker as she walked away from what was left of the Boom. She had only been able to hold him, reassure him that Pully was doubtless fine. "He's probably smoking ganja somewhere totally unaware of what day it is, let alone what's happened here. He'll be okay."

He had to be. For Thomas's sake.

So Striker left thinking of Thomas, thinking of his concern for his best friend, and thinking of his kindness towards Morien. She thought of Danny and how relieved she had been of his safety. She thought of the Boom and the sick emptiness she felt now that it was gone. And she knew that she had to check on Morien: to ensure that the brothers hadn't gone after her after their business at the Boom Shack was interrupted. Ensure that Morien wasn't ill, or upset. Ensure that she hadn't destroyed their blossoming friendship with one stupid revelation.

She thought I was straight.

Had she hoped I was straight?

Surely that means she only wants friendship?

She made her way to the nearest bus stop, determined to catch the first night bus heading east. The air was heavy with humidity and the scent of smoke, and she sped up as she felt the first few fat drops of rain, seeking cover under the bus shelter.

There would be some wait until the next bus, so she made herself as comfortable as possible on the hard plastic seat, curling her long legs under her to avoid the developing downpour.

West's Law of Bus Shelters: wherever you're sheltering, the prevailing rain and wind will always be coming straight at you.

She was half asleep when they roused her: her thoughts lurching in exhausted, whirling dances

lead by Morien and Thomas and cold-faced men and guns. This time yesterday, she thought, this time yesterday....

Her head jerked up at the touch on her shoulder and her eyes widened at the sight of two policemen staring down at her.

"Are you all right, miss?"

Striker sat up, pulling a jacket more firmly around her. "Yeah, I'm good. I was just waiting for the next bus."

"It's not a good area to be in this area alone, miss, you know that, don't you?"

"I'm cool, really. I know this area pretty well."

The questioning officer paused, then asked. "Do you know the Boom Shack?"

"The Boom Shack?"

"Yes, the club off the High Street. Do you know about the incident there this evening?"

She couldn't get involved. She really couldn't get involved. For Morien's sake. "Sorry. I've heard of the club, but I've never been there."

There was another pause and Striker hoped her lie had been convincing. But the next question assured her that it hadn't.

"Is your name Striker West?"

Striker shifted back in her seat, suddenly feeling threatened. There was no escape from this. She was backed into the corner of the bus shelter with the two policeman in front of her; their marked car parked on the street behind them.

"What's this about?" she asked, her voice sounding sharp in the confined space.

"Miss West, I'm Police Constable Dobbs from Clarke Street Police Station. This is Police Constable Walter. We've had a call from a member of the public who witnessed a woman matching your description selling illegal substances in this area earlier this evening. Could you turn out your pockets please."

"What?!"

"It is within our power to stop and search you, Miss West. Could you turn out your pockets please."

Striker stood up, furious, causing the policemen to take a step back. "This is fucking ridiculous."

She yanked her wallet from the pocket of her jeans, handing it to PC Walter, turning the pockets inside out. Then she ripped her jacket off and threw it at PC Dobbs. "You fucking check it if you're so convinced I've got drugs."

PC Dobbs held her jacket carefully and searched the pockets in the inner lining. He brought out her apartment keys, which jangled on the end of his finger as he handed them to his colleague. He picked her lighter from the lucky dip, raising an eyebrow to his colleague at the miracle of flame. And then his hand went in for a third time.

And pulled out the cigarette packet. Striker knew that was all she had in her pockets. PC Dobbs opened the packet to glance at the contents... and drew out a see-through plastic bag, half-filled with small, white, slightly chalky rocks.

Oh fuck....

She'd seen enough of it in her bad old days to know exactly what this was.

Crack cocaine.

Lots of crack cocaine in easy, dealer-sized chunks.

PC Dobbs's eyes widened in the dark of the bus shelter, and his gaze moved slowly from the plastic bag to Striker's own horrified stare.

His mouth started moving and Striker watched his lips form the words, not fully absorbing their meaning. "I am arresting you for possession and intent to supply an illegal substance," he said. "You do not have to say anything, but it may harm your defence if you do not mention, when questioned, something you later rely on in court. Anything you do say may be given in evidence. Do you understand?"

Striker nodded dumbly. What was the point in protesting?

She could only think of one thing: *a little gift.*

Very clever.

* * * * *

Striker tried to guess what time it was. About 5 a.m., maybe? Maybe later.

They'd taken her watch. Her wallet. Her keys. Her jacket. She wondered if they were taking her sanity too.

She was sitting in a custody cell. Light was coming from a single, dim lamp embedded in the

ceiling, and through a small, high-up window which threw the shadow of bars across the grimy white walls. But light had been changing for some time now. From electric to natural. The sun had risen.

There was a bed in the cell, narrow and hard, but she hadn't been able to sleep. The custody area had been busy all night: cries, screams, expletives in waves. The occupant of the next cell had been shouting - curses and threats - on and off for hours. There had been a time when she's shouted back at him, but the sore throat she'd given herself was in vain. She had sat with her knees up, her hands round her legs for what seemed like half the night. Exhaustion was turning her thoughts into a labyrinthine web full of dead ends of impossible images, voices and threats. She kept forgetting the questions they had fired at her, mis-remembering her replies.

"Where did you get the drugs from?"

"I didn't get the drugs. The first time I saw them was when that cop pulled them out of my jacket."

"So they miraculously appeared in your pocket?"

"I don't know how they got there. Could have been a miracle. God moves in mysterious ways, I'm told." She was getting flippant, she knew. But this was becoming so unreal. She leaned forward on the table in the interview room. "Look, I guess they could have been slipped into my jacket at the Boom Shack."

"Oh, so you admit now, you were at the Boom Shack?"

"Yes, I was."

"Why did you say that you'd never been there."

"I shouldn't have lied. I just didn't want to get involved."

"And you were there when the club was targeted?"

"I wasn't inside the club at that point."

"Where were you?"

"Outside, in the alley."

"So, you saw the men go in?"

She thought before she answered. "No, I think I must have just missed the excitement."

"Yet, you were still in the area over two hours after the attack?"

"Apparently so."

"What were you doing all that time?"

Striker tried to make herself more comfortable on the hard bed and struggled to think clearly. One thought was dominant in her mind, as it had been throughout her interview. If she told the police about Nigel and Bruce - about their threats, about their 'gift' - then the brothers would know she'd talked, and Morien would be in danger.

So she had given an answer that she knew would condemn her. "I was just hanging out."

There was movement at the other side of the interview table, as if her questioners had just scored a little victory. The man sitting next to her, a sallow-faced solicitor whose name she kept forgetting, glared at her dolefully.

Then the web had revealed another, unexpected pattern. "I see from your record that you're being investigated by police up at Percival Hill for breaking and entering a property in..." he consulted his notes, "Easthouses Terrace?"

"I'm *what*?!"

"Breaking and entering... oh, and vandalism at that address. Are you telling me you know nothing about it?"

"I... I *know* about it, but...." But she couldn't get Morien involved.

"But?"

"I didn't do it."

The detective looked at her, long and hard. "I believe a Detective Sergeant Manifold wants to talk to you further on the subject." *Stupid, fucking trenchcoated prick.* She wished she'd pushed him down the stairs when she had the chance. If she'd had the chance.

And then a new question had come scuttling down the strand of conversation like a fat spider.

"Miss West, do you know Gilbert Lamprey?"

To Striker, this had come from leftfield. "Pardon me?"

"Gilbert Lamprey," the plain-clothed officer asked.

"Gilbert Lamprey? I've never heard of him."

"You've never heard of him?"

"No."

Both policemen watched her intently.

"So, who is he?" she said, after a moment.

"We wondered if you had come across him or any of his associates... his family." For a tiny second, a spark of recognition must have ignited in Striker's eyes.

And they had seen it.

Striker sat in her cell with her head in her hands. Family. Nigel had mentioned his family, hadn't he? An uncle. It could be coincidence.

It just didn't feel like it.

The hatch in the cell door crashed open and Striker saw the tired eyes of the woman police sergeant who had been on duty all night. She had been friendly - as friendly as she could be given the circumstances. She had been checking on her every hour or so, since the interview. She had fetched her a cup of water when Striker had requested it. She had even arranged for Striker to see the Medical Examiner when she had mentioned the bump to her head. She hadn't given the details, of course, despite the questions. Just an accident.

"What time is it?" Striker called to her.

"5.45," the sergeant called back. She was about to shut the hatch.

"Hey, did you manage to call my friend?"

"Sorry, no. Still no reply." Striker rubbed her forehead. *Where the fuck was he?* Thomas had reassured her that Danny was safe. So, why wasn't he home yet? The woman sergeant was still watching her through the hatch. "Is there anybody else I can call?"

Morien. Striker knew that she would come without hesitation, however upset she had been, she would come.

But Morien had been ill.

She was under threat.

Striker couldn't ask her to come.

But she was running out of options.

Of the people she knew, whom she was friends with... was there anybody who wasn't associated with the Boom Shack, who could vouch for her, who could associate her with the world outside

drugs and clubs?

Yes.

But he was going to kill her.

Better than languish in a holding cell. She had rarely needed to ring him, but she'd always had a good memory for telephone numbers. The sergeant was still waiting. "There's a colleague of mine," Striker said. "His name's Kishen Mistry, he's a doctor at St Vincent's. Could you phone him?"

Chapter 11: *In the shadow of Crow*²

Morien drifted into consciousness.

It was very bright in the room. The curtains were open. She was still dressed in the blue-green dress that was now streaked with dirt from the Boom's alley, lying on top of the bedclothes on her still-made bed. Her head was pounding, and she wondered for a moment if she was going to be sick.

Little crystalline moments from the night before sparkled in her mind. Striker talking, Striker's eyes, the roar of the music and the lights that made her head whirl even now, the gentle touch of a giant hand helping her into a taxi. And at some point she must have made it to bed. Kind of.

There were dancing rainbows on the wall from where the prism in her window caught the sunlight. It must have rained last night, there were still drops on the glass. She couldn't remember.

Had she paid the taxi fare?

Had Thomas paid?

Had he told Striker what had happened?

Oh God, Striker. She didn't want to remember that bit.

She finally made it to her feet, suddenly incredibly grateful that Striker had 'bought' her a few sickness days. Gastro-enteritis. It didn't feel too far from the truth. She faltered to the bathroom, and considered the porcelain for a while, before assuring herself that she wasn't going to throw up after all.

So she moved into the kitchen, took her pills, risked taking some aspirin as well and then drank down a glass of water. Then another, for no other reason than to swallow the nagging thought that she ought to make an appointment with the doctor. Normally, it was at nagging times like these that she would reach for the radio. But her radio was in pieces. She picked a CD from her selection - which Striker had carefully alphabetised, she saw with a smile - and made use of her still-functioning stereo.

She stripped off her clothes, wandering naked into the bathroom, and revelled in the feel of the water as she showered. The smell of lavender soap seemed to wake her a little from her lethargy - it removed the reek of the evening before, the stink of the alley, the smell of sweat, and of cigarettes that seemed to have permeated even her skin. But at the last she hesitated. The smell of cigarettes had brought back the vivid memory of the two of them lost in the calm centre of their own vortex, while the world around them had danced themselves to a blur.

It had brought back the slow-changing shades of Striker's eyes that mesmerised her even in memory.

It had brought back the joy of simply talking without reference to her health or wellbeing, without advice or reminders or pity. Just talk about subjects that didn't really matter to anybody - but had suddenly meant the world to her.

And then the revelation.

Striker was gay.

No, she wasn't gay. She didn't like being labelled.

But she certainly wasn't straight.

Except....

The water beat down on her. She didn't attempt to wash away the smell of smoke. She knew now this was the closest she'd ever get to the scent of Striker on her skin.

Striker didn't find her attractive.

Can I blame her? I'm a ruin.

She turned the water off.

Maybe it was for the best. She wanted Striker in her life. That knowledge had been like a fire inside of her from the time she'd first seen Striker on the platform. From the time she'd first heard Striker's voice caressing her. She was in deep, and she didn't want to get out.

She needed Striker in her life. She needed to know that she could pick up the phone and hear that warm, sweet voice. If only that.

The phone rang. She paused for a moment, remembering too clearly the recent implications of that noise. But then wondered... could it be Striker?

She wrapped a towel round herself and went to pick up.

"Hello."

"Where the *hell* have you been? I've been worried sick."

"Drake, don't you ever work?"

"I've got a free period. Where the hell have you been? Are you okay?"

"I'm fine." A big fat white lie. "It's all been a bit of a shock, but I'm okay, really."

"Where were you last night. I phoned."

"Sorry, Drake. I should have called you. I was out."

"Obviously. Where did you go?"

"Are you asking because you're simply interested or are you checking up on me?" she snapped.

There was a pause. "Because you're my sister and I care about you."

Okay, now I really feel horrible. "Drake, I'm sorry, it's been a weird few days, you know?"

"I know."

There was a peaceable silence for a moment. And then the tumult of Morien's earlier thoughts rushed to the fore. She ventured: "Drake, can I ask you something."

"Mmmm?"

"How... how did you know that Kerensa was... you know... 'the one'."

There was quiet at the other end of the line. "I suppose I realised I didn't want to be without her. I can't imagine not seeing her every day, sharing things with her, hearing her voice... you know?"

"Yes, I think I know."

"Why, Mo? Are you missing Sophie?"

Morien sighed. "No, I'm not. I ought to be, but I'm not."

"What's up?" His voice was reassuring and kind.

"I've met someone... someone else."

"Is this the friend who's been helping you?"

"Yes."

"And you think she might be 'the one'."

"I don't know. She's beautiful... in so many ways."

"...but...?"

"She doesn't seem to feel the same way."

"Oh."

"It's just... I don't know if my feelings for her are a result of the last few days... hell, the last few months - she's been so kind to me - or if this is really... *it*."

"What *are* your feelings for her?"

Morien smiled. "I can't imagine not seeing her every day, sharing things with her... hearing her voice...." She could hear Drake chuckle. It was a good-natured sound.

"Time, Mo," he said. "I guess you give it time. Figure out what you feel about her. Figure out what you feel about Sophie. This woman can figure out what she feels about you. In the meantime, be friends."

"Since when have you been so wise, brawd bach³?"

"Since I met Kerensa."

"I always suspected she was the brains of the outfit."

Drake laughed. "Yeah, I love you too, Mo. So... were you out with your mystery woman last night?"

"Well, I was out with her for a while."

"Where'd you go?"

"A club she knew down south."

"A club? *You*?!"

"It was okay for a while, but I left early."

"Didn't set the night on fire, then?" She could hear the amusement in his voice. "Count your blessings, though, at least it wasn't the club that burnt down last night."

"What club?"

"Haven't you heard? It's all over the local news. Something to do with drug gangs, they reckon. I remembered the name, cos it's kind of ironic: the Boom Shack."

Time stopped.

"What did you say?"

Drake's voice came distantly from a lifetime away. "The Boom Shack. You know... fire... boom...."

"Drake...," she swallowed the bile that was rising in her throat. Her voice seemed swallowed too. "That's where I was."

"Mo... Morien...?"

She put the phone down.

Striker. She had to be all right. She *had* to be all right. *I've only just found her.* Immediately, she dialled Striker's number. It rang ceaselessly. No reply. 10.05 a.m. But of course, she was supposed to be working today.

She looked up the number of St Vincent's A&E in the phone book and dialled.

Eventually, a harassed-sounding woman answered: "St Vincent's Accident and Emergency Department."

"Oh, good morning," Morien responded. "Is Striker West available please?"

There was a pause. "Um, she's not in today."

Morien's heart sank. "Oh... I'm sorry, she said she was working the day shift today, isn't that right?"

Again a pause. "She *isn't* working today."

Morien was aware of the hysteria begin to build. "You wouldn't happen to know where she is, would you?"

The woman's tone became frustrated. "I can't give you that information. Now, is this a personal call, or can someone else help?"

"I'm sorry, I'm just..."

Morien winced as she heard the receiver slammed down at the other end. She dialled Striker's home number again. Again, no answer.

Striker, where are you?

* * * * *

Striker had finally been released with the sun high and the morning already up and about and causing traffic jams. She was left with a preliminary court date, her own copy of her interview tape, a splitting headache and the kind of mood that made a raging minotaur look like a docile household pet.

Kishen had met her in the lobby with the words, "My wife is going to kill me. And then she's going come after you."

"She can join the fucking queue," Striker glowered as she stalked past him.

They walked out of the police station and Striker walked straight into the nearest newsagent. A pile of local newspapers lay on the counter, emblazoned with a photo that vividly captured her memories of the previous night: the bewildered clubbers, the police cars, the fire engines, the ambulances, the smoke. No, the photo didn't show smoke - but she could still smell it.

She went in search of foreign newspapers, and found the previous day's *New York Times*, then found herself back at the counter, the photo staring up at her. Her hand hovered over the top copy, before she picked it up, paying for the papers and two packets of cigarettes, and left.

Kishen was waiting for her outside. She ignored him, instead flicking through the *New York Times* for the sports pages, then unpeeling the plastic from a cigarette packet. "You shouldn't smoke," he said, watching her.

"You been talking to Morien?" Striker said, quietly, not expecting a reply.

"Sorry? Isn't she...?"

"Never mind. Want one?"

"Yes."

"Hypocrite," she said as she pulled out two cigarettes. She lit them both and handed one to

Kishen. Then returned to the paper.

"What are you doing?" Kishen asked, blowing out smoke.

"The Phillies had a game day before yesterday. I never got the score."

"Glad to see you've got your priorities straight. Well, if you don't need me anymore, I'll just go to work, shall I?"

"Yeah, you're late. I'm late. Sorry." She wasn't even looking at him.

"Lucky I didn't have surgery this morning."

"Next time I'll try and get arrested on your day off, okay?" Striker bit back, folded the newspapers under her arm and started walking.

Kishen stood on the pavement, staring after her for a moment. And then he opened his mouth. "Well, fuck you," he said loudly, causing consternation to a little old lady who was scrutinizing apples at a greengrocer's stall. "I'm woken up in the middle of the night...."

"It was morning." Striker stopped and turned round.

"Bloody early in the morning... to find that some fucking psycho I have the misfortune of knowing has got herself arrested for drug dealing and wants someone to come and hold her hand...."

"I never asked you to come down here."

"Oh, yeah, right. I was going to say 'thank you very much, Mrs Police Officer' put the phone down and go back to sleep?"

"I needed to tell someone...."

"I stood as fucking surety for you, Striker. They've got my bank details. You could cost me God knows how much, and now I have to apologise for the fact that I have to go to work?"

Striker breathed, a long, slow breath, and let go of enough anger to walk back to Kishen. She looked down at the pavement as she spoke. "Kish.... I'm sorry. I'm being a bitch. I'm not thinking straight. I haven't slept in over twenty four hours. I've had the night from hell...."

"I know."

"And I don't know what I'm going to do." She shrugged hopelessly. "But you didn't have to come down. And... I can't tell you how much I appreciate that you did."

"Blimey, is that gratitude coming from Striker West?"

"Not bad, huh?" Striker smiled, wanly, letting the smoke escape. "Look, I'm gonna head home, change clothes and follow you to Vinnie's, okay? You said you'd called in, right?"

"Yes, I did." There was a catch in his voice that made Striker pause.

"And what aren't you telling me?"

Kishen sighed. There was no easy way of telling her this... but he was going to give it damn good try. "They're not expecting you at work today."

There was a pause. A long pause.

"Excuse me?"

"You really ought to speak to the sonofabitch."

Striker towered over him. "What the *hell* did that bastard say to you?"

* * * * *

Morien had worked herself into a frenzy by the time she emerged from the Tube station and headed towards Striker's home.

She had spent the last hour picturing Striker burning to death.

She had pictured her unrecognisable in a hospital.

Then she had pictured Striker dead in a ditch.

She had pictured her falling under a bus.

She had pictured Striker drinking herself into a stupor because of Morien's dramatic exit. She had pictured her drunk in a ditch.

She had pictured her in the bed of some one-night-stand....

And that picture was almost as unbearable as the first....

She had pulled some clothes on, almost forgetting to cover her head, grabbing a little corduroy cap as she ran out of the door.

Now, Morien made her way through the concrete housing estate in which stood Striker's apartment block, grey, stained and miserable. The lift seemed to be working, but smelt

unpleasant, and she opted for the stairs, taking them two at a time; then a walkway, and she found herself at Striker's front door.

It was painted blue. The paint was peeling. The front door bell didn't seem to be working. She knocked hard.

No answer.

For a long time.

And then the door opened.

In the space of twenty four hours Danny had changed. He looked overcast, tired. His eyes weren't sparkling as they had done yesterday. His clothes looked rumpled and dirty and smelt strongly of smoke. He cleared his throat uncomfortably before he spoke. "Hi... um....," he said, blinking in the light.

"Hi, Danny, I'm sorry to disturb you. Is Striker here?"

"No," he said, "I guess she's at work. I've only just got back myself."

Morien's heart sank. "She's not at work. I called there."

Danny was beginning to look upset. "I thought Striker left with you last night. She was looking for you."

"No, I was... ill. I went home."

Danny blinked. Twice. Then closed his eyes. "Oh Jesus, no."

When he opened his eyes again there were tears.

"Danny, please tell me she got out...."

"I don't know."

And they were both silent - their voices crushed by the weight of supposition and grief.

Danny pushed the door back. "You'd better come in."

Their living room looked dark and neglected. Danny landed heavily in the armchair. His fingers moved to his throat, rubbing as if it was sore. Morien sat on the edge of the couch, clutching at the seat.

The upholstery material was rough and worn beneath her fingers. There was an abandoned spider's web catching nothing but dust in the corner. The daisies sitting on the coffee table were

drooping. There were circles on the table's surface, showing generation after generation of mugs, glasses.... Imprints, where once was life.

The smoke from Danny's clothes seemed to hang in the air between them.

Neither of them spoke. There was nothing to say.

There was a creak and the rattle of keys. The front door opened. Both Danny and Morien looked up, startled by the sounds, to see Striker enter in a cloak of grey anger and exhaustion.

Striker had assumed that she would be coming home to an empty apartment. She had planned to rage within its walls, kick the furniture, call the sonofabitch and tell him exactly what she thought of him and his fucking hospital, and then drown her sorrows in a bottle of whisky and a cloud of cigarette smoke.

Instead, in a rush, she found her arms full of trembling Morien.

She could get used to this kind of welcome.

Morien's arms had found their way under her jacket, her fingers now clutching at the t-shirt beneath. Her head tucked itself neatly just at Striker's shoulder, her face buried, so all Striker could see was corduroy. She was saying something, mumbling something like a charm that vibrated against Striker's body and when the taller woman pulled back a little so she could look at her face, she saw the tears that were streaming down Morien's cheeks.

And, for just a moment, the anger and exhaustion and the sheer hell of the night stepped back, and let loving concern take control. She tossed the newspapers onto the table, so her arms were free for Morien. "Hey," she said, running a gentle finger down the Welsh woman's cheek. "What's all this? Are you okay? I was worried about you last night."

Morien almost choked. "You were worried about *me*? Striker... we thought you were dead. I was so scared...." She buried her head back in Striker's shoulder.

Striker closed her arms around Morien, feeling, rather than hearing, the sobs against her chest. She looked at Danny, shocked at the sight of him. He was breathing hard, his hands were shaking. He sat back heavily, and rubbed his face.

"Where the fuck have you been all night, sis?" His voice was shaking too.

"Where the fuck have *you* been? I've been trying to call." The anger welled up in Striker again and she loosened her grip on Morien. "At least, the police have been trying to call."

"The police?"

"I'm your friendly, local drug pusher." She thrust Morien away and collapsed onto the couch. "Jesus Christ, I don't know what I'm going to do."

"What happened?" Morien sat beside her, a small hand resting on her knee.

"I've been charged with possession of crack cocaine with intent to supply.... I didn't...." she said at Morien's appalled face "...it was planted on me. By Bruce and fucking Nigel."

"Who?"

"Bruce and Nigel. The guys who torched the Boom last night. The guys who ripped up your apartment. The same guys who in all probability attacked you back in February. And now, thanks to them, I've lost my job and I'm going to get locked up for a crime I didn't fucking commit." She looked at Morien. "And it seems I'm prime suspect for trashing your place too."

There was a silence in the room. A stunning, breathtaking silence, until it was broken by Striker's yell: "*THE FUCKING BASTARDS!!*" She dived forward picking up the first breakable item that came to hand, and hurled the jug of wilting daisies at the wall. The jug erupted in noise and fragments, as both Danny and Morien ducked for cover.

Stagnant water dribbled down the paintwork, leaving a miserable green stain. The daisies lay broken on the carpet. Striker's legs seemed to give way and she fell back onto the couch. Her face fell into her hands. "Sorry," she mumbled.

"Striker...." Morien didn't know what to say. Then: "This is my fault, all of it. It's my fault that the club.... I'm so...."

Striker's voice was muted in her palms. "This is *not* your fault. *None* of it is your fault. They would have gone after the Boom even if they'd never heard of you."

"So what did the police say?"

"About what?" Striker looked up.

"About this Bruce and Nigel. Surely they've got to follow up your allegation that the drugs were planted on you."

"I didn't tell them."

Striker's statement betrayed a tone of embarrassment, but her voice was ultimately calm and strong. Again, there was a silence.

"You didn't.... *Why?* You could clear yourself...."

Striker looked her in the eyes. Morien's gaze was deep green, multi-faceted and sparkling with anxiety. She couldn't bear to see the light go out in those eyes. "Because they threatened you." Striker reached out, took Morien's hand in hers, and simply held it.

That was all.

"Striker, what the hell is going on?"

Danny had almost been forgotten. Striker didn't break from Morien's gaze. "The less you know the better, bro." Finally she tore herself away and looked at him. "Dan... I'm sorry. Maybe you ought to get out of here for a few days, huh? Maybe stay with your mom and dad, or could your girlfriend put you up?"

"Sis...."

"I don't want you to get hurt too, Danny... please."

Danny looked at her for a long time. He didn't understand any of this. But he understood the look in Striker's eyes. *Trust me, please.*

Then he licked his lips. "Well, I could do with some of mum's cooking...." He didn't seem to be looking so pale now.

"Get her to save some jerk chicken for me, 'kay?"

Danny got up and started for his room. "Save some of my mum's jerk chicken? No way, sis. Come round and fight for it, like the rest of us!" He gave her a wink and a grin and shut his bedroom door.

Then the music started. Striker yelled, "Turn it down, bro, I'm fucking blitzed." The volume went up... for a full five seconds, then turned right down. Striker smiled, a little, tired smile, and turned back to Morien. Giving her hand a squeeze, she said, "And you get out too."

"Get out? I'm not getting out."

"But Morien...."

"Striker, this is my mess, not yours." Morien's eyes were almost cold with determination. Her voice was low and serious.

But so was Striker's. "No, this is *our* mess. I couldn't get in any deeper if I was wearing concrete shoes."

"That's not funny."

"Nor is the thought of you getting hurt. *Please*, go to Wales, go stay with your dad or something."

"And what are you going to do?"

Striker pulled away, leant back on the sofa. "I don't know. Got a spindle I can prick myself on? Sleeping for a hundred years sounds pretty good."

"Seriously...."

"Seriously? I'm going to find out who the fuck Gilbert Lamprey is, and why he wants to ruin my life."

"Gilbert Lamprey? What's he got to do with all of this?"

Striker's eyes widened. "You know who he is?"

"Yes. He's listed as caretaker of a few council-owned properties, including the buildings on Tumblety Street. At least he was. I tried to get hold of him, but he was...."

Striker sat bolt upright. "And this was included in your proposal?"

"Well, he was mentioned...."

"No wonder they wanted it."

"So, who is he?"

"Exactly."

Chapter 12: *Miching Mallecho*⁴

"It's suicidal."

"What have I got to lose?"

"Your life."

"Big deal."

"*Striker*.... Are you always this stubborn?"

"Do you always nag this much?"

Morien bit her bottom lip, an action that Striker was beginning to find mouth-watering, when she could think beyond her frustration. "You might think it's nagging, but I... I care too much about

you to see you in some alley with your head bashed in." She looked away, upset and frustrated, absent-mindedly running her hand over the material ridges of her cap.

Striker watched her, her own anger vanishing in a mist of guilt. She wondered if Morien was even aware of actions. *Does she know how beautiful she is? Does she know what a jerk I am? Course she does.*

"That cap looks good on you," she said. "I like your headscarves, they're pretty, but the cap...."

"Is that your way of saying you're not going?" Morien interrupted.

"No."

Morien regarded her for a moment, picturing her with tubes in her veins and the incessant beeping of the EEG. *What story would I read to her before she died?*

Striker had emerged from the bathroom clean, refreshed and too wired to sleep. Her mind had been chasing the events of the last twenty four hours through a forest of thorny problems and shadowy branches and had finally caught a single, struggling idea. A foolish, harebrained idea that had Morien wanting to shake some sense into her.

"I think you're mad," Morien said.

"Welcome to the party."

"You *can't* go." It had meant to be a plea, but it came out stronger, more desperate.

Striker's eyes blazed white-hot and she was on her feet in front of Morien. "Don't you fucking dare tell me what I can or can't do. You're not my...." And she stopped and turned away, her eyes closed and her mouth pursed.

Morien was stunned. Striker's anger had come from nowhere... and gone again - as if she'd caught her own arrow in mid-flight. An arrow that had been aimed directly at Morien's heart. And instinctively, Morien knew that whatever she said now was going to make the situation worse. But she had to say something.

So she went for the bluff. "If you're going, then I'm coming with you."

There was a long pause as Striker spun round, looking at her in shock. "The fuck you are."

"You insist on going, then I'm coming with you. I know the area. I've been there. I've studied it. It's the one thing that might just make sense in this stupid, insane idea."

"You can't come."

"Now who's giving the orders?"

Striker glared at her: half-furious, half-panicked. What could she say? *It'll be dangerous. I can't bear for you to get hurt again. You still have something to lose. So many things.*

I have you to lose, Morien's eyes said. But the only words she spoke were, "I'm coming." *We're a tough breed, we Welsh.*

And that's how they found themselves on Tumblety Street.

It was deserted.

Striker wasn't sure what she'd expected: somewhere in the inner recesses of her imagination had been the image of sharp-suited men skulking in doorways with violin cases under their arms.

It was almost disappointing to find there would be no musical recital.

The street was quiet and shadow-touched, all stained brick and rotten woodwork and cracked paving stones. On one side were crowded, small, two-up, two-down terraced houses; front doors kissing the street. Once they would have been seething with happy life, perfect urban cottages. Once a community would have existed here: housewives scrubbing their front steps, gossiping at their front doors, children playing in the street, workers merely needing to cross the road to earn their living. Now, there was barely a house without a broken window. A couple didn't have roofs. There was a large gap at one end of the row, where one house seemed to have completely collapsed. Where glass still existed, it was caged by bars - almost if the few surviving residents were defacing their own houses to prevent vandalism by another's hand. The houses huddled together in the shade, as if they were scared children hiding from bullies.

The other side of the road was dominated by two warehouses. Once upon a time they would have been handsome red brick buildings, factories providing work, providing life to the area. They could see, high up on one of the buildings, a plaque carved in red stone. But the figures had been worn by generations, until only a few letters - a guess at a year - were left. The buildings had been cursed by time to become barren monsters, holding only memories and rats.

The street was completely silent. Not even a breath of wind touched the dust. The houses stood empty, any of the inhabitants either seeking a few hours escape from the darkness, or concealed behind ragged curtains and decayed wood in terrified stillness. What did they see from their darkness? Did they see no evil, hear no evil, speak no evil? But Morien knew that wasn't true, because one of those anonymous dwellers... just once... had made a phone call to the police that meant she was standing there now.

The quiet was both unsettling and reassuring. Striker heard a tiny sigh from her companion. "They spend a fortune building new houses and all it takes is a little imagination and a little care to give this street, these people, a new lease of life."

To Striker it seemed appropriate that the only sound to be heard was Morien. A voice of hope. She looked at Morien, raised an eyebrow, a hand, a silent question.

Morien gave an unsettled smile that didn't reach her eyes, but moved forward, down the cracked pavement, nervously stealing along the wall of one of the warehouses. Striker followed, not least because she didn't want to be left behind.

They made no sound, and no sound came back to them, until they reached the corner of one of the large buildings. And then Striker gasped.

It was as if it was being held prisoner: some fragile, mythical rara avis, caught in the stranglehold of an industrial age. Even in its heyday, even when people used it for worship, for meeting, for silent contemplation, had it ever actually belonged?

A small chapel, swallowed by the size of the neighbouring buildings. It looked as if it could have been a house: no steeple or tower like a church, simply a sloping, slate roof, trying to match those across the road. The windows were high up the walls, again barricaded by wooden planks. The stonework had been white, once. But now its whitewash was grey and filthy in its attempt to escape from the future. Its peeling paintwork made it look as if it was now trying to flee from itself. It was surrounded by rusted railings, once contrasted black. A wooden sign still clung to the metal bars: The Salem Chapel, established 1899.

It had been dying slowly ever since.

But somehow, Striker could see why Morien was so drawn to it. It was special, different, a building that was straight out of fantasy. There was a porch to one side, as if the building had turned its face away from the reality of the street. The metal gate hung partly open, but creaked as they brushed past. The main, double doors were closed, handles locked together by a large padlock.

Striker frowned at it, murmuring "How the hell did you get in here before?"

"Almost a year ago, I came with a group of others from the unit. We were simply checking some of the council's mothballed properties. Keith Tivison had the key. I was so amazed by the place I came back the following week, just to have another look. I did some sketching, but that was it. A few months later, when I tried to get back in, the key had been lost. My proposals for the chapel were all based on what I saw a year ago."

Striker tested the padlock. Solid and strong. She ran short fingernails along the metal plates that held the handles to the doors. Looking around, her eyes settled on the railings that separated the chapel from the street. Then, pacing slowly along the posts, she tested each one.

"What *are* you doing?" Morien asked, her voice loud in the silence.

Striker glanced up at her. "Archimedes's key," she said, smiling, and grabbed at one of the railings. With a twist and a grunt, it came away in her hand.

"Striker..."

Shaped a little like a crowbar, the metal shaft had a flattened point at one end, and Striker took the point and thrust it, not at the padlock, but into the wood behind one of the metal plates. Barely a centimetre was jammed behind it. Then Striker jumped, pushing down on the bar with the full force of gravity and her weight. The wood cracked, the metal plate swung loose with a rattling crash, still attached to the padlock, leaving a door that simply needed a push to open.

Morien's eyes were wide. "Striker, that's breaking and entering!"

"Hell, after arson, assault and attempted murder, what's a little breaking and entering between friends?"

"Where did you learn...?"

"You wanna go in or not?"

Striker pushed at the door, which opened quietly at her touch. Morien swallowed and they stepped inside.

Both stood for a moment, their eyes adjusting to the gloom. It was as quiet as spiderwebs. Light was somehow finding a way in, between the boards and the dirt at the windows, and like a camera coming into focus, they started to see shadows, then shapes, then objects.

The chapel was still exactly that: rows of pews ran from back to front, an aisle up the middle, all facing the plain, wooden platform at the opposite end of the room. There was another door to one side of the platform, small - designed to be unobtrusive - which could only lead to a vestry. Like its exterior, the chapel interior had once been painted white, but here the paint was shredding away to reveal grey, damp stone walls. The floor, too was grey stone, ironically worn to almost shining white in places. Once there had been hangings on the walls, but all that was left were the shadows of what had once been. Above the platform, almost as an afterthought, was the outline of a cross.

Something wasn't right.

Morien moved forward, Striker following her. A finger reached out to touch the wooden back of the last pew, as if she was nervous to touch it. Nothing happened. No alarms, no raised voices. Morien ran a hand along the wood. Then moved forward, starting to examine them, one by one, her advance quickening.

In the silence, her soft, lyrical voice was almost a shock. "I love these pews, they're so beautiful. Look at the carving on them." She ran her finger round an intricate leaf pattern of an armrest, in a way that made Striker wonder what else she could do with that finger.

"There are hinges on the seats," Striker said, glancing at the detail without much thought. She was far more interested at looking at the expressions crossing Morien's face. She looked like a child on Christmas morning: so much delight in everything she saw. How could anyone have

gone through the trauma that Morien had experienced over the last few months - the last few days - and still find such innocent pleasure in life?

You are so amazing....

"Striker, I'd forgotten the seats open!" Morien moved into the gap between pews to take a closer look. "I wonder what they used to keep in these. Spare hassocks or something I...." The words fell away. Her mouth seemed to go slack.

"Morien...?" Striker moved up aisle, until she could see what Morien was staring at. And she found herself staring just as hard.

A distant, insanely rational part of Striker's mind stated that Striker ought to be getting used to having her world turned upside down by now. Certainly, the spinning events of the last few days suddenly clicked into perfect, rational, surreal focus.

The rest of her consciousness simply whirled about her, as Morien's voice, breathless and lucid at the same time, came through the whirlpool: "Tell me... tell me that's not what I think it is."

Neatly stashed, lying in long rows and tall piles inside the pew seat were plump, plastic packets of white powder.

And, at last, a single thought penetrated Striker's adrenalin-shocked mind: *Morien was right. This is suicidal.* She moved to the next pew and opened the seat. The same again. Packet after packet of smooth, white powder. And the next, opening the seat: "Jesus," Striker murmured, "there must be millions of dollars' worth...."

Morien too was moving further down the aisle on the opposite side, opening seat after seat. Striker could hear, could almost feel, Morien's quick, short breaths as if they were coming from her own lungs. She could feel her heart pounding against her chest. Carried away with the momentum, Striker lifted another pew seat and....

...it was as if her heart had stopped.

No packets, no drugs. She looked closer, trying to wrap her mind round what her eyes seemed to be seeing. Then she wished she hadn't.

Hidden in the deep shadows of the seat was a plastic sheet. It was almost opaque with liquid, hard enough to make out in the shadows as it was, but she knew it was enveloping... flesh... and bone....

She wanted to drop the lid. She wanted to reel back, hiding her eyes from the sight in front of her. But she couldn't move. She could do nothing but stare.

Where there should have been a face was a mass of blood, brain tissue and loose teeth. There was nothing left that indicated that once this had been a human being, a living breathing, loving

human being.

Except....

Except... glinting in the half-light, almost hidden under a loose flap of crimson flesh was a single, gold...

...tooth.

And Striker wanted to scream. She could hear her own voice inside her head screaming: *You stupid bastard. You stupid, fucking bastard. Why didn't you let them pass? Why didn't you just let them....*

Paully. Lil' Paully....

And at last she closed her eyes. It didn't make any difference. She could still see, imprinted on her eyelids, the image of him - what was left of him. And with that image, it was as if every sense was abruptly heightened: the smell of death, the gagging taste of bile in her mouth, sudden sounds in the street outside; creaks, rustles, the sounds of an aged building. She heard the soft echoes of Morien's footsteps and dropped the lid of the pew, then spun round to face the smaller woman.

"What is it?" Morien spoke softly, her voice taut.

Striker put a finger to her lips. "Nothing," she whispered, guiding Morien away from the pew, down the little aisle towards the entrance. "You were right, we shouldn't have come here...." Morien's mouth opened and Striker almost slammed her palm across her mouth, and bent brushing her lips against Morien's ear. "There is no way they would have left this place unguarded. We've got to get out...."

Those creaks, those rustles, they were developing into something more. An aural jigsaw. There were noises now from the street outside: footsteps, voices.

The creak of the gate.

Morien stopped dead.

Striker dragged her back, back down the aisle, past the pews, down to the front. Trapped by the platform under the ghostly cross.

Clear now, a Cockney accent, "They've fuckin' jimmed it...."

"The bosses are going to fuckin' kill us."

Another quieter, calmer, "Sshh, they'll still be in there..."

Barely perceptible: "Shut the fuck up then."

Then nothing but fear and heartbeats... as the damaged door swung open....

Striker closed the vestry door behind them. There was no way of locking it, the key long lost. But, in the dark, they could make out boxes, lots of boxes, carefully sealed, but unlabelled. They didn't stop to imagine what was inside, but pushed and piled as many as they could in front of the door.

Her heart pounding, her breathing so fast she could barely hear the movement outside, Morien sunk down onto one of the boxes. She was feeling dizzy, sick and terrified of losing control. It was creeping up on her. That same feeling of panic that had ambushed her at the Boom Shack. For a second, images spun before her eyes: flashing lights and thumping beats, mingled with fear and screaming and the gagging smell of smoke. She wrapped her arms round her body, almost as if she was trying to stop her chest from expanding with air.

Striker grabbed her, pulling her to her feet. "Get away from the door." She tugged her back into the darkest corner of the vestry, pulling her against her own body, and wrapping her arms around her. In the cool of the darkness, they struggled to control their fear. The silence in the room was only broken by their gasping breath, but beyond that, beyond the door was the ruffle of danger.

Footsteps.

Low orders.

"Check the pews." A voice calm, quiet and full of authority.

One by one they could hear each lid being lifted and dropped back in place. The women flinched, each bang like a gunshot.

Again the voice, laced slightly with humour: "Matey boy still there?"

There was a murmur of affirmation, and Morien could feel Striker tense still further behind her and swallow. The tall American was shaking. Morien could feel the vibration all the way down her body as she stood pressed against her.

Cornered like a wounded animal, there was nothing Striker could feel but fear. There was nothing she could see but Pully's ruined face. Words kept going through her head: a rational voice that wasn't rational at all. *Back of the head. Execution style. It wasn't even an accident.* Would they be up for the same fate? Footsteps getting closer. She clutched Morien to her, trying to believe that the princess and her protector would escape this and live happily ever after.

Some fucking protector.... She'd got them both killed.

Morien became aware of a shivering mantra at her ear. "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. I'm so sorry."

Morien closed her eyes, holding her breath. She could feel Striker's painful slide into shock, as if it was her own. But she wasn't going to slide. She grabbed onto reason with her fingertips and held on for Striker's dear life. Exhaling slowly, holding her body completely still, she could feel Striker's hand pressing into her waist. She covered it with her own, trying to instil some kind of calm into them both.

Boots against stone, shuffling outside the door. They could hear the door handle scraping against the boxes piled against it. Morien's eyes flicked open. The vestry was only a small room, the walls as dirty a white as the main chapel outside. There was a tiny window high up above them, which looked partly bricked up. There was no chance of escape through there.

Voices through the wood.

"The door's locked."

"It can't be locked. There's no key to it."

The door rattled, banging against the boxes.

A snarl. "It's fucking barricaded, you prick. There's someone in there."

Striker swallowed again, bowing her head to find an ear. Her mouth moved, although barely a word could be heard. Her utterance a single, shaky exhalation. "Three of them... maybe four."

Morien clutched Striker's hands at her waist. Her mind trying to settle on anything that might help. She leant her head back against Striker's shoulder, feeling her friend's heartbeat strong against her back, merging with her own. From her new viewpoint her eyes settled on the shadowed ceiling... darker in the far corner. A dark square.

The door banged against the boxes again. The boxes quaked, shifting millimetres. Angry voices outside. Morien turned her head, her lips close to the column of Striker's neck. In other circumstances... maybe in another life now... but maybe.... "Striker," she whispered. "Could you reach that hatch?"

Striker's hands moved, abruptly, abandoning their warm home at Morien's waist, and landing suddenly on her arms. A brief pat, a fleeting pressure on her cap - almost automatically, a faint kiss, a nuzzle that said *Well done* - and Striker flew across the floorspace. She scrambled up onto another box and reached up.

The door was edging open, the boxes wobbling, shifting, millimetre by millimetre. Swearing, encouragement, more swearing drifted through.

Striker's fingers touched the wooden cover of the hatch in the ceiling. On tip-toe, stretching as high as possible, she seemed to grow further inches in her determination. The hatch moved, dislodging dust which showered down onto the tall woman. Momentarily, she coughed, blinking, but spluttered, "Come on," not caring any more whether the men heard her or not.

Morien scampered across the floor to Striker's outstretched hand, and suddenly she was up in the air, Striker's hands back round her waist, lifting her. She grabbed onto the hatchway, pulling herself up through the hole, her arms straining at her own weight. With one last push she found herself face down on wooden floorboards, thick with dust. She turned, reaching a hand down to Striker, and together they pulled the American up - Striker wincing and breathless at the scrape of wood against her already bruised body - then pushed the hatch cover back into place.

There was a crash from below as the door finally gave and boxes sprayed across the vestry.

"There's no one here."

"Could these boxes have fallen against the door?"

"Yeah, and I suppose the boxes jimmied the lock out front as well, you wanker."

They were in an attic. Once a storeroom, the small space was almost empty, with only a few broken chairs and a large wooden crate clues to its erstwhile use. They were right under the roof and the ceiling sloped to such a degree that Striker could barely stand upright. It was filthy, and smelt of damp, and it finally hit Striker what had bothered her below. From the outside, the chapel had looked neglected and dirty. But in the main room there had been no dust. Nothing could be contaminated. Everything kept neat, ordered and wrapped in plastic.

She grabbed the crate, full of paper and what looked like old hymn sheets, and with the strength of the desperate, pushed it across the floor to cover the hatchway. It would be almost impossible for the men to find a way up here, but now there was no way back for them.

She looked at Morien, who was dusting herself down as if there was nothing wrong. There were voices from the men below, and banging. She could tell they were trying to get the hatchway open, but this crate was too heavy to budge, compared to the smaller boxes.

"What now?" Morien's voice came to her through the shadow.

Striker ducked down as she came towards her, her hands feeling along the dark, oblique wall. "Here," she said, suddenly. "Help me." More wooden boards, all but camouflaged against the grimy brickwork.

There was a disagreement going on below, but they could barely make out the words above their own concentration. The damp wood was ripping, the rusty nails that attached it to the plaster were bending. Quickly, they were able to work the few boards free, to find hidden behind it, a skylight.

"Hardly Victorian," Morien commented quietly.

"You complaining?" Striker retorted, trying to find a way to open the window. The glass was still intact, wedged into place by a layer of weather and grime. The catch was jammed and

immovable.

"Fuck it!" Striker exploded. She hit the frame in frustration. It didn't move.

There was another series of thumps from beneath the crate, another burst of expletives below in muffled echo.

Striker grabbed one of the broken chairs. "Get back," she said. Morien pressed herself against the wall as Striker swung the chair back and flung it against the glass.

The glass remained unbroken. The chair shattered into pieces, leaving a single leg in Striker's grasp. There was silence. "I don't fucking believe it," Striker muttered. She went for a second chair and was about to hurl that at the window when something came whizzing through the floor, so close she could feel the air graze her face.

She froze.

Complete silence.

And then another bullet penetrated the floor.

All she could see was Morien's eyes, a shocked green, staring back at her.

The floor creaked beneath her feet. How long would it take their weight?

She could see Morien's lips moving: "Don't move!"

Striker nodded.

Another shot.

Striker risked a step back, balancing on the balls of her feet, using the chair to steady her. The floor creaked faintly.

Another shot erupted through the floor, an inch from where Striker had been standing, and exploded like a firework through the skylight, cracking the glass.

For a long moment, Striker held Morien's gaze, until her mouth broke into a wry grin. "Cool," she said, an eyebrow lifting, but her voice was shaky. Using her entire body, the space available to her, and every ounce of the terror and adrenaline that was coursing through her body, she swung the chair back and, with an explosion of sound, glass and wood, smashed the window.

The skylight was low enough for both women to scramble out of it with ease, manoeuvring themselves onto the slipping slates of the roof. They could hear other gunshots, but none came near them.

A slate came loose beneath Striker's arm. They watched it slide down the roof and crash to the ground below.

"Oh shit."

Again Morien found herself trying to catch her breath, her eyes closed. *Think, gwyrionyn, think!* She groped for her bearings. They were staring up at the miserable red brick of the second warehouse. Tumblety Street would be to their right... so... the alley....

The alley where she'd been attacked was below them. Which meant....

She swallowed her fear and made a decision. Slowly, spreading her weight out as much as she could, she inched down the roof.

"Morien, what the fuck are you doing?" she heard from behind her.

As she reached the guttering at the bottom, she eased her upper body up so she could look down. It wasn't too high a drop, but not low enough to ensure a safe landing. But what did catch her eye made her smile. *God bless twentieth century Health and Safety officers.*

"Come on," she called back to Striker, and launched herself off the edge of the roof.

Striker almost screamed.

She was on an unsafe roof, shit knew how high above the ground, the body of one of her friends decomposing in a pew seat below her, there were gangsters after her, she was beginning to feel light-headed from panic and exhaustion, and her would-be girlfriend had apparently just jumped to her death.

Surreal didn't come close.

Another shot came from below, this time zipping through the broken skylight. As if she hadn't enough incentive already, it spurred her to a gentle, wobbling slide down the roof, until her boots were in the guttering. She too eased herself up... to find Morien looking up at her, worriedly, from just a few feet below, having landed on the warehouse's old metal fire escape.

Jesus Christ, I love you, Morien, but don't ever do that to me again.

Striker jumped. Slates came tumbling down after her, crashing to earth, and her boots landed with a clang on the metal staircase.

Both women dashed down the steps, tasting freedom, and pelted down the alleyway. They didn't stop to look, but ran down Tumblety Street, away from the chapel. A shout went up behind them, loud enough to wake the dead. "THEY'RE HERE!"

Then running footsteps.

With longer legs, Striker found herself in front, reaching back to try and help Morien along. They could hear the pursuit behind them, and Striker glanced back to see two... three... then a fourth man spill out of the chapel entrance to join the chase. Ghouls. Skinheads and suits, but no sign of the brothers. The women hit the corner at full speed and careered down another road, perceiving now the sound of traffic from up ahead.

"There...", Morien gasped, and in front of them was a bus stop, a large red double decker seeming to wait for them. With a cough of exhaust it started to move as they approached.

"Stop!"

As if the driver could hear them.

Striker gripped Morien's arm, and with a single, enormous leap, she reached the pole at the back of the bus and the momentum threw them both inside onto the floor.

They looked up to see the bemused stares of passengers; and then back to see their pursuers skid to a frustrated stop on the pavement.

For one moment Striker wondered if she had the energy to get up from the floor, but Morien staggered to her feet and pulled her friend up with her. Striker crashed onto the nearest seat, her heart pounding and her breath hurting her. Ignoring the whispers of their fellow passengers, she pulled Morien down next to her, and unwilling to let go of the reassuring presence, she kept Morien's hand cocooned in her own.

Slowly their breathing evened, and Striker looked at Morien. Her voice was quiet as she spoke, untrustworthy now of anyone but the woman next to her. Even of herself. "I'm sorry. You were right all along. We're going to go to the police. We're going to tell them everything."

Her voice was uncharacteristically earnest and it made Morien look up into her face... to find that it was, yet again, hidden by a curtain of loose, now dusty, hair. "I was stupid," Striker voice came, ashamed, "I put your life in danger and I'm sorry. I couldn't..." Her throat contracted. *I couldn't live with myself if anything happened to you.* The thought of Pully... the thought of that happening to Morien... made her stomach and throat clench. That's why they had to go to the police. She could trust Nigel and Bruce and their 'family' about as much as she could trust herself. They'd spent the last few days looking over their shoulders. She now knew enough to realise that if they didn't go to the police, they'd spend the rest of their lives doing the same thing - whatever Nigel said. She wanted protection for Morien, and she wanted justice for Lil' Pully.

She wanted vengeance for Pully.

Her eyes still burned with the sight of him. How the fuck was she going to tell Danny about this. How the fuck was she going to tell Thomas.... *Poor Thomas....*

"Hey," a voice interrupted her thoughts. A warm, beautiful voice. "There's nothing to apologise

for, cariad," it said - and she was hearing it with her heart, not her head. "I reckon we're in this together, don't you think?" And a hand squeezed hers.

Striker looked up and saw twinkling, soft eyes looking back at her. She couldn't bring herself to tell Morien what she had seen. At least, not right now, when she was still having a problem keeping down the contents of her stomach. When she was feeling dizzy from shock and adrenaline rush, and her entire body ached from last night's beating.

Instead, she lost herself in the gaze.

"You know something," Morien said, staring back, taking in the dust and the grime that covered the American, and losing herself in the blues and greys that shadowed Striker's own eyes, "you look awful."

The corner of Striker's mouth rose. "Thanks, you look great," she said. Her head dipped for a moment, and Morien could feel a thumb slowly circling her palm. It was excruciating. She was feeling inexplicably exhilarated, after such a narrow escape, and with Striker's smoky voice and half-closed eyes so close.... It was all she could do not to pull Striker's head down and slip her tongue between those slightly parted lips. "Morien," the lips said and something wet and wanting started to pool between Morien's thighs. "Morien, I know we need to go to the police, but I really need...." *Oh, yes, need....* "...I really need to get my head together, maybe lie down. Just for a little."

Morien blinked.

"Maybe if we went back to my apartment. I could just get my head together before we go. Is that okay?"

Morien blinked again, focusing on the dark circles under Striker's eyes. She could feel her hands shaking under her fingers. Morien nodded, smiling, only half-wanting to lose the inappropriate and terrifying fantasy of making love to Striker, even if it was just with her gaze. Striker smiled back.

"Ladies, tickets....," a man's voice interrupted.

Striker glanced up at the waiting conductor, and then looked back at Morien. "Do we have any idea where this bus is going?"

* * * * *

Once they discovered that the bus was going in completely the wrong direction, and confident they'd put enough distance between themselves and Tumblety Street, they got off and headed for the familiarity of the Underground.

Then back to Striker's apartment.

There was a strange but familiar light, as if the sky was flashing, as they entered the Bronte Estate. Striker gave a weary sigh, feeling words boil out of her, despite the bone-deep weariness of both her mind and body. "Neighbourhood kids causing trouble again, little shits," she said. "Happens all the time... the police are called... everyone gets disrupted... they round 'em up, take them away... and then it all starts over." She looked at Morien. "But, if the cops are going to be around for a while it'll save us the bother of..." They rounded the corner and Striker stopped in her tracks. "Oh my God," she said. "Danny...."

Chapter 13: *The invisible starfall*⁵

To Morien, the flashing lights were like a half-forgotten bad dream. Police cars, an ambulance, voices everywhere: there were people being questioned by officers, onlookers hanging over the balustrades of the upper balconies of the apartment blocks, talking amongst themselves, shouting down comments.

To Striker, it had become her worst nightmare. The moment she had seen the ambulance, the paramedics, the stretcher, the moment she had seen the body laid out on it, she had known it was Danny.

She tore across the estate, knocking past bystanders, pushing past policemen, screaming at them, "He's my friend, for fuck's sake, let me by, let me get by." An officer who was interviewing a distraught young Asian woman was almost pushed to the ground.

In the lightning dash, there was one detail that had registered. That body wasn't covered. That body was alive. She crashed almost to her knees at the side of the stretcher, ignoring the paramedics, whose faces she recognised, whose names she knew. She'd worked with them all at Vinnie's. But now all she could think of was, "Danny."

He was unconscious, an oxygen mask over his mouth and nose. He had a neckbrace, medical pads on his head. His skin was reddened, bleeding in places; there were purple marks under his eyes. "Bro, you're going to be all right, okay. You're going to be all right. I promise."

Morien watched her friend's distress as if it was her own. She started after her, pushing past, her heart pounding for Striker. She was desperate to comfort her, desperate to reassure her, desperate to heal her wounds as Striker was beginning to heal hers.

She bumped into the Asian woman, but turned to put out a supporting hand on the stranger's arm. Only for her rushed apologies to die on her lips. "Asha? Asha, what are you doing here?"

Her work-mate's red-rimmed eyes looked at her blindly for a moment.

"Morien..." There was an uncertain, half-smile of recognition. "I came to pick Danny up. We were supposed to be going to his mum's." A little sob bubbled up. "I found him..."

"Asha... I'm so sorry." Morien put her arms round her friend and Asha willingly leant into her support, but Morien's eyes never left Striker.

She was leaning over Danny, talking to him, the paramedics were trying to move the stretcher into the ambulance but Striker's presence was preventing them.

"Striker..."

"Why didn't you get out, huh? I told you to get out of here." She stroked his dreadlocks. They were stiff with dried blood.

"Striker..." She looked up. A paramedic was standing over her. "We've got to take him now."

"You're taking him to Vinnie's?"

"Yes."

Striker got up, allowing the paramedics to manoeuvre Danny into the back of the ambulance. "Fine," she said, "I'll come with you."

Asha started forward, but it was Morien who put a hand on Striker's shoulder. "Striker, you can't help him when you're panicking. Let Asha go with him."

Striker turned, looking at Morien as if seeing her for the first time. Then she looked past her, to Asha. She saw her distress, her red-rimmed eyes, the need to be with Danny - a need that she recognised in herself, empathised with, but now associated with someone very different from her flat-mate.

She let go... and nodded, and Asha climbed into the ambulance.

Morien was already rummaging for her mobile phone. "I'll call a taxi. We'll be right behind them. I promise." But she wasn't sure if Striker heard her, as the tall woman watched the ambulance move off, its lights flashing, and charge, screaming into the evening. She seemed to be withdrawing: allowing the growing shadows to swallow her.

A police officer advanced on them. "Are you Ms West?" he asked Morien, then turned to Striker as Morien shook her head.

"Ms West, I understand you're Mr Giboyeaux's flat-mate. Do you know of anybody who might have done this?"

Striker looked at him, watching his mouth move, but it was Morien who answered. Her voice was not commanding in the least, it was soft, charming, friendly, but it did command. "I'm sorry, but I don't think now is the time. As you can imagine, Striker's had an awful shock and she needs to be with her friend. Perhaps it would be best if she came to the station to make a statement when she knows more about Danny's condition." She took Striker by the arm and led her away, off the estate, away from the onlookers and the police and the apartment. Striker followed like a child.

The taxi arrived just a few moments later and they sat in tense silence all the way to St Vincent's.

* * * * *

The evening rush hour had been at full swing: cars following a faulty choreography to encircle London in a slow dance. Somehow Danny's ambulance had been able to get through. The taxi hadn't been so lucky.

By the time Striker and Morien made it to St Vincent's A&E department, there was no sign of Danny or Asha.

The moment she was on familiar ground, Striker seemed to stumble on a reserve of energy. With complaints in her ears, she pushed past the queue at reception and shouted. "Ria, Danny Giboyeaux. Where is he?"

The woman at the other side of the desk looked momentarily stunned. "Striker, you aren't supposed to be here. You know what *he'll* do if..."

"He can go screw himself, now where have they taken him?"

"Excuse me," a loud voice interrupted. "I was here first. I have a nasty ringing in my ears and I want to...."

"You want me to do something about the ringing in your ears?" Morien could see the look in Striker's eyes from where she was standing, and she knew that if it was possible, the would-be patient would be a smoking hole in the floor.

"Well, how rude....," came drifting over from the reception desk, but the patient stepped back.

"Who's got him?" Striker asked again. *Please tell me Kish hasn't gone home yet. Please tell me Danny's in his hands.*

"Mr Mistry," Ria replied and Striker was gone, leaving a crescendo of comments in her wake and a beleaguered receptionist. Feeling unsure of what to do, Morien waited to one side, watching.

From the alley to here. This is where she had been brought in. This is where she'd been pushed

ahead of the broken fingers and the ringing ears and had her life saved. And her soul saved. She closed her eyes for a moment, taking in the sound of A&E: hushed voices, raised voices, phones ringing, a child crying, someone swearing at an unpredictable drinks machine, complaints, pleas, laughing.... All of life was here... and death was just round the corner. And somehow, Striker seemed to straddle both. This was her place... this was where she worked, where she thrived, where she helped people, where she had helped Morien. For the first time.

"Are you okay?"

Morien opened her eyes into a pair of two perfectly blue eyes that reminded her, as they always had, of the sky over the bay. "Yes, I'm fine. What's the news on Danny?"

"I don't know, they're still running tests, but I've found Asha." She held out a hand which Morien took willingly, and Striker led her into the labyrinth.

* * * * *

They waited in a small, open seating area just off a main corridor: Striker and Morien on a narrow, battered settee; Asha on a deep, lumpy armchair. There was a coffee table in the middle, covered in out-of-date magazines.

They waited in a vacuum of silence. Around them the nurses chatted, laughed, gossiped and tapped down the corridor in their sensible shoes. From time to time a newcomer would hail Striker with a greeting and puzzlement. Striker would acknowledge them with a quiet nod. The only noise she made was from the juddering of her left leg: a nervous twitch that made the heel of her boot tap against the floor. Morien rested her hand on the arm of the settee, covering the material in invisible doodles as a finger traced pattern after unconscious pattern. Asha sat still, her feet together neatly, her hands together on her lap, her eyes closed. Morien wondered if she was praying.

They waited.

A small, white door off the corridor opened and Kishen appeared in neat scrubs, stopping in surprise as he saw who had come to join Asha. "God, Striker, I had no idea this was *your* Danny," he said.

"In a manner of speaking," Striker replied, glancing at Asha.

"And Miss Llewelyn, nice to see you again."

"And you, Mr Mistry. I'm sorry it's...."

"How's Danny?" Asha interrupted.

Kishen now focused his attention on her. "He's still unconscious. He's had a CT scan and it seems he has an intercranial haemorrhage. So, as soon as he's stabilised he'll be going in for surgery...."

"An intercranial haemorrhage?"

"He's bleeding into his brain," Striker said in a quiet voice.

"He's going to be all right, isn't he?" Asha looked at Kishen.

"It's very hard to say at this point. We'll have to see how he comes through the surgery."

"You mean he could die?"

Kishen's mouth opened and closed; and then: "I'm not going to make you any guarantees. Please understand that he's in a very serious condition. It's hard to say what even a potential outcome could be at this stage, until we get in there and have a good look. He might have every chance of a full recovery...."

Asha backed away, sitting heavily on the armchair, her face in her hands. Morien followed her, crouching down in front of her, her hand comforting on her knee.

"Kish, do you know what happened to him?" Striker asked.

Kishen shrugged. "Beaten around the head with something blunt... Striker, does this have anything to do with your arrest?"

Striker swallowed, wondering what to admit, feeling defensive. She said in a low voice, "With Danny it could just as easily be an irate husband, you know? But...."

"But...? Striker, we can't be sure, neither of us is in forensics, but Eric Haywood thinks he's seen this kind of thing before. He thinks Danny's been pistol-whipped. Now, I've got to go back in, but at some point you're going to have to tell me what the hell's going on, all right?"

Striker nodded, her head low.

Kishen turned away. "And you're obviously determined to deprive me of sleep today, aren't you?"

Striker smiled a wry smile that didn't reach her eyes as Kishen disappeared through the door. She stood for a moment, sending a silent prayer after him, before she felt a warm presence at her side. It gave her momentary burst of joy to know that she didn't have to turn round to know exactly who it was.

"What did he say?" Morien asked, quietly.

"That if this isn't linked with Nigel and Bruce then it's one hell of a coincidence."

"Because we broke into the chapel?"

Striker turned, her head bowed so close that Morien was breathing in her whispered words. "It can't be. Danny was attacked while we were there. They must have been after something else, and Danny got in their way. Stupid bastard... I told him...."

And then a loud, slightly nasal voice intoned, "Ms West, what are you doing here? Your employment has been terminated."

He was short, middle-aged and balding - and his expensive suit was filled to bursting with plump flesh. He wore a yellow polka dot bow tie.

It was this that Striker focused on as she swayed on her feet, because she knew that if she looked at this sonofabitch's face, looked him in the eye, then she would follow it up with a fist.

Her voice was tight with a surge of barely-controlled anger, and she had to shove her hands into her pockets to stop taking him by the impeccably tailored lapels. "I know I'm fired. Though it seems I was the last to know."

"I believe a message was left for you to telephone me. You didn't. In the meantime there is a formal letter being sent to your home address."

"Why have I lost my job?" Her voice had become quiet.

"I believe you've been charged with possession and dealing of a class-A drug. That's a serious offence, Ms West."

"You believe? You *believe!*?" Striker took another step towards him. Morien put a hand out, catching her sleeve to still her progress. Striker didn't seem to notice, even though she stopped. "You won't even wait for confirmation... solid evidence of my crime?! Do you really hate me or something?" Striker asked the rotund man. "Am I that bad at my job that this hospital can't bring itself to support me in any way? Give me the benefit of the doubt.... Believe me when I say I'm innocent?"

"You're not bad at your job, Ms West, but you have an unfortunate attitude...."

Striker was on the move again, and again a gentle hand stilled her. "*Attitude?! In whose opinion? Have you asked the staff here? Is my attitude so unfortunate that they can't work with me? And what about the patients who have been in my care? Do they think I've got such a bad attitude that I shouldn't be working here?*" She stopped for a moment, apparently considering.... "You know, you're right. It's a serious offence. Suspension, under the circumstances, maybe that I could understand. But you, you asshole, you see it as an opportunity to get rid of someone who questions your authority, don't you?"

There was a silence. The whole waiting area was silent. There was silence at the nurses' station down the hall. There was silence along the whole corridor. Morien wondered if she could hear bated breath on the floor above.

And then the round man spoke. "You haven't answered my question. What are you doing here?"

Striker shook her head, ripping her arm away from Morien's grasp. "For your information, you stupid, inconsiderate bastard, I am here because my best friend is badly injured and might... might die. Now if I can't come here as a normal member of the public to support my friend then I will forcibly remove the rod that is apparently wedged up your fat, clenched ass...."

"Is that a threat, Ms West? Surely you realise that a threat such as that, in front of witnesses, vindicates my actions?"

Striker smiled. "Yeah, you little sack of shit, it's a threat, because I *will* get you where it hurts you the most. You take away my right as a member of the public to be here, and I will sue not just this hospital but your sorry ass for every penny you've got. Do you understand?"

And it was this that seemed to get to him. He swallowed, noticeably, and his skin paled. He ran a stubby finger along his collar and took a step back.

"Of course... that doesn't include that tribunal I'll see you in when I'm cleared of the drugs charges."

"Ms West," he said, feeling the need to clear his throat. "Of course I accept your reasons for being on hospital premises. I simply felt it necessary...."

"Fuck off," Striker said. And he did.

Striker looked as if every last vestige of energy had drained from her in the outburst. She backed up to the seat, almost staggering, and crashed down. Morien followed, waiting for her reaction, not even aware of the withdrawal of prying eyes and whispered comments.

Slowly, Striker looked up, looked her in the face, and then all Morien felt was the warm weight of the tall woman's body as it came down on her, arms holding her, a head resting on her shoulder, and a shudder as if tears were on their way. Morien responded, enveloping Striker in an embrace, stroking the hair - so loose now it could barely be described as braided - stroking the broad plain of her back through the leather jacket, dislodging chapel dust. "Hey," she said, "you were great. And you *do* do a great job here."

There was a sound from her shoulder that could have been a wry chuckle, but could have been a sob.

Morien continued, caressing, holding as if she had Maccsen in her arms, not a thirty-two-year-old, six foot woman. "Everything's going to be okay, Striker. I promise."

Again, the chuckle, the sob. Morien felt Striker shift slightly, and moist words breathed against her neck. "You're a magical person, Morien, but not even you can promise that."

"Maybe," Morien replied, "but I have to believe it. And I know that you don't deserve this, Striker. You've been through hell this last couple of days, and it's not fair."

Striker lifted her head, and Morien was surprised that her cheeks were dry; there were no tears in her eyes. "No, *you* don't deserve this. Asha doesn't deserve this. Danny doesn't deserve any of this. Me...."

"You *don't* deserve this."

Morien's gaze was so determined it almost scared Striker, but she argued anyway, putting a hand to Morien's cheek. "Yes, I do. Don't you see? I've fucked up. Again. This is what I do, Morien. Wherever I go, however hard I try, it goes wrong. If you know what's good for you, get out now."

"Striker, you're tired, you don't know what you're saying...."

"I know exactly what I'm saying. You don't have to stay here anyway. There's no reason for you to stay. Danny's my friend, he's Asha's boyfriend. Go home, honey. Live your life, huh?"

"No way, Striker. I'm staying. I might not know Danny so well, but he's a good person, and I need to know that he's going to be okay. And I'm Asha's friend, and... I'm your friend. And I need to know that you're going to be okay, too."

"Oh, I'll be fine," Striker said, showing her teeth. "I'll carry on with my life, leaving misery and destruction in my wake, as I always do. I've done pretty well here... maybe it's time to move on...."

Morien was getting angry. She glanced at Asha who was self-consciously immersed in a magazine, patently and politely ignoring them. They were conversing in whispers, but Morien's whispers were getting harsh. She wanted to spit a thousand words at Striker, but she left it at four. "You don't mean that." It was a statement not a question.

"Why not? I've got nothing to keep me here. No job. Danny... if he pulls through... he's got Asha now. And there's no sign of mom. Do you know how many Wests and Baileys there are in London?" Striker reached inside her jacket and pulled out a cigarette packet, tapping it with fidgeting fingers.

"Striker..." Morien pulled Striker's face towards her, holding it to ensure she would hear and understand what she was about to say. "Striker... you have me."

Striker's eyes were a cold blue, as beautiful as the sky over a snow plain. She smiled, a warm, loving smile, and the cold seemed to thaw. "I have you, and you are a good, sweet person. You are the best, Morien. And I have been honoured to know you. But, you have Sophie." She got up.

"And I need a cigarette."

* * * * *

Morien watched as the swinging of the double doors emphasised Striker's departure. A small worm of doubt ate at her, asking the question: would she come back?

She had to grip the seat to stop herself from making a dash after her.

But what Striker had said was true. She had Sophie, and three was most definitely going to be a crowd.

So what was stopping her from putting pen to paper right now, tonight, and telling Sophie that they were finished?

Fear.

She knew that at some point Striker was going to leave - when she realised that Morien wanted commitment, when she realised how difficult a commitment to her was going to be - and hadn't Striker just said that herself? And then she would be alone, with no one. But Sophie. Even though Sophie was on another continent, in another world.

She knew that it would only be a matter of time before Sophie left too. She knew her girlfriend well enough to know that when reality struck she would be unable to take care of her needs now. Unable or unwilling.

She loved Sophie, she knew that. But she was *in* love with Striker.

Sophie was kind, loving, safe. Striker was dangerous, volatile... exciting. And that was just friendship. Morien knew as a lover she would be so much more. She had seen glimpses of the passion on which Striker kept a not so tight rein. She had been witness to the simmering emotions just over the last few days. What would happen if she let that passion go free? Striker was a fantasy. A beautiful, miraculous fantasy that was only staving off the inevitable.

And what was the likelihood of Striker ever lavishing that passion on her?

None.

But she also knew that her relationship with Sophie would never survive just a simple friendship with Striker. It would be too encompassing. Two would be a friendship, three would be... Too much... too much....

So should she let Striker go? Should she let Sophie go? Or should she just live the fantasy... a little longer... just a little longer? Except this fantasy seemed to go hand-in-hand with guns and

violence and people getting hurt.

And drugs. Lots and lots of drugs.

When they had heard the news about Danny, she and Striker would go to the police. There was even a police presence somewhere in the hospital, she knew. Waiting for news, as they were. Waiting to see if it was assault or murder that they'd be investigating.

But everything seemed dependent on whether Striker would ever come back.

The door had stopped swinging a long time ago.

"She's something else, isn't she?"

In all that time, Morien had forgotten Asha, although the other woman had dropped the magazine some time ago to watch her colleague.

"In all sorts of ways," Morien replied, still staring at the door.

"Danny talks about her a lot. I thought they were a couple when I first met him. He kept asking me out and I kept saying no because I thought he was already in a relationship. It took me ages to work out that they were just flat-mates."

"Just flat-mates."

"And good friends."

"Best friends." Morien closed her eyes, still seeing the closed door on her eyelids. She needed to get her mind off Striker or she was going to go insane. She finally focused on Asha. "I didn't even know you knew Danny. When did you meet him?"

Asha smiled. A wistful smile, that turned her lovely face into a work of art. "A while ago. I go to clubs. My parents think I'm round at my auntie's, but I go out with my cousin instead. Danny just kept showing up at the same clubs. We have the same taste in music. I went to a couple of his sets at the Boom Shack and we got talking. I always thought he was... really gorgeous." Another shy smile.

Morien nodded her agreement, and responded to Asha's puzzled look with, "I'm gay, not blind."

"Funny, isn't it? You and Striker, me and Danny, and there we were, sitting next to each other every day, talking about the intricacies of the Woodhall Estate project." There was a pause.

"Morien, can I ask you something?"

"Mmm?"

"Have you and Sophie split up?"

"No... no. Striker and I, we're friends. We haven't... don't... you know?"

"Oh... right," Asha responded in a tone dripping with good-natured disbelief. But her smile waned. "No, I shouldn't have asked. I'm in no position to judge you, Morien," she continued. "I lied at work today. I told them I had a dentist's appointment so I could leave early and meet Danny. And right now, my parents think I'm round at my auntie's helping with the new baby. Tonight, they're going to find out that I've been lying to them all this time, that I've been doing everything that a good, Hindu girl shouldn't be doing, and that the man I'm in love with is not even Indian, let alone Hindu. But it doesn't matter... because the only thing that matters is that Danny..." Her voice, calm and strong until that point, suddenly broke. "This is so unbelievable. This shouldn't be happening...."

"He'll be all right," Morien said, reaching for her hand. *He has to be all right. For Asha's sake, for Striker's sake.*

She jumped as the door swung open.

And the relief almost made her light-headed.

"I thought you guys might be hungry so I brought some sandwiches." Striker placed the plastic containers on the table. "If you can call them sandwiches. Vinnie's isn't known for its cuisine."

* * * * *

"I called Danny's parents," Striker said as she watched Morien and Asha pick their way through the sandwiches.

Asha looked up from an unenthusiastic lettuce leaf. "Thank you. I wouldn't have known what to say."

Striker shrugged. "We thought it best that they don't come down right now, as there's nothing to do but wait. Although we'll probably get the whole Giboyeaux clan arriving at some point. I said we'd keep them updated."

Asha nodded.

"Don't you want anything to eat?" Morien asked her, offering up a drooping egg sandwich.

Striker shook her head. "Not hungry," she said, and looked away. She wasn't going to admit that panic had driven her out into the early evening, and that not even the expectation of a newly-lit cigarette could mellow the images in her mind. She'd abandoned her smoke and found instead the nearest toilet and herself on her knees on the tiled floor, vomiting all the images, all the shock and the horror of the last few hours, into the bowl.

I can't take any more of this. It was almost a prayer as she leant her hot forehead on the dingy paint of the toilet wall. I don't know how I'm going to go on.

She had no job.

She was scared to go back home.

Danny's life was on a knife-edge.

Paully was... dead. She swallowed, convulsively.

And she and Morien were in so deep she could see the sharks circling above them.

Welcome to reality.

She and Morien.

Me and Morien.

This might be hell, but at least they were in it together. And despite everything, the thought made her feel better.

This time... I'm not alone. And I'm sure as fuck not leaving Morien to handle this on her own.

She had got up, flushed the remains of her appetite, and had gone to give reality a dose of its own medicine.

But that didn't mean she could face the hospital's idea of food yet.

"Are you all right, Striker?" Morien asked, abandoning the sandwich.

Striker shrugged again. "Tired, I guess."

"You could go home."

"Yeah right, and get my head kicked in. Besides I want to be here for Danny."

"Then stretch out here. There's room." Striker eyed the narrow settee uncertainly. "Just shut up and get your head down, stalker."

"You really are a nag." Striker said, but carefully folded herself onto the seat. "Um... this isn't going to work."

"Well, put your head down here then," Morien said, patting her lap.

Striker stared at her for a moment, panic and exhaustion warring in her head. Exhaustion won. She collapsed onto Morien's lap, her eyes closing almost immediately, just at the bliss of being horizontal, let alone the soft, warmth of her pillow.

"You comfortable?" Morien asked, looking down at Striker's relaxing face.

"Heaven," Striker mumbled.

Morien smiled, and glanced at Asha, suddenly aware of the first blush of... embarrassment? Arousal? Feeling awkward, and wondering why she had suggested this in the first place, she tried to find a place for her hands and settled for a compromise: one on the arm of the settee, the other resting gently... platonically... on Striker's right shoulder.

Maybe she could do this.

* * * * *

Time passed.

Again they sat in silence. Occasionally Morien and Asha would swap a comment, but mostly they left each other to their own thoughts, their own fears.

Morien looked down at Striker's sleeping face, mentally tracing the gentle incline of a cheek, the strong, determined jaw, her eyelashes lying dark against her pale skin, still a little dirty from the chapel. She looked like a sleeping cat... a big cat... a panther, wild and dangerous and beautiful.

Trying not to disturb Striker, she reached down to her bag, pulling out the pad and pen she carried with her - grateful that she'd remembered them today. Striker shifted on her lap but then settled again almost in the same position. Gently, Morien started to sketch. Despite the restrictive circumstances, this was so different than before. Her former portrayal had been from memory, and had been coloured by wonder and fear before she'd destroyed it. Now she had her model on her lap, her warm breath against her thighs, even through the material of her trousers. It was intimate and arousing and as personal as a kiss.

Asha glanced over at her, but Morien was too absorbed to care about what Asha might think now. Maybe later she'd sketch Asha. It would be something for Danny to have *when* he woke up.

A drowsy voice drifted up from her lap. "Hey, are you drawing me?"

Morien smiled. "Yes. Do you mind?"

There was a pause. "No, I guess not. Though you'd have to be one hell of an artist to make me look good right now."

"You always look good."

"You should see me first thing in the morning."

"I've seen you first thing in the morning, remember? I'm sorry if I woke you."

"I wasn't asleep," Striker replied. And she hadn't been. She didn't think she'd ever sleep again. But she'd allowed Morien's warmth to lull her into an almost meditative state, although still sensitive of the sounds around her, the familiar bustle of a hospital settling in for the night. Had Kishen appeared she would have been on her feet before the others.

She hadn't allowed herself to think, merely to be, her mind thankfully blank. She had only allowed herself to be aware of Morien beneath her: the scent of her, the soft touch of her fingers on her shoulder... the delicious closeness of her centre. Morien smelt of lavender and the sun-warmed scent of kindness and, hazily, distantly... maybe she just imagined it... the mouth-watering scent of arousal. Striker had allowed herself to sink into a reverie of Morien and herself. Not sexual - she was too tired for that excitement even in fantasy form - but a beautiful memory of the last time she'd slept, with Morien in her arms.

Until the object of her desire had moved under her.

"Am I really going to have to do something drastic to get you to sleep?" Morien asked, bringing a hand up to brush the overlong, errant bangs from her forehead. She noticed how Striker's eyes flickered shut at the action, so she did it again.

"What you got in mind?" Striker asked with a crooked grin.

"I'm sure they've got some spare ether or something round here," Morien replied, stroking Striker's hair again.

"Ether? You're no fun," Striker said, her eyes drifting shut despite herself.

Just like Macsen, Morien thought, and again ran her fingers over Striker's dark mane. Striker's eyes stayed closed, and she made a noise that sounded to Morien like a purr. A big cat's growling, contented purr.

Morien smiled and left a hand to rest in Striker's escaping tresses, while the other continued to sketch.

* * * * *

Time passed.

It was quieter now. The hospital had given one final, echoing yawn of noise and settled down for

the night. It had been dark for some time, or at least Morien imagined it to be without the aid of a window. Her watch told her it was past dark and into pitch, had the lights of London allowed it.

Asha had curled herself into a ball on the big armchair, lost in her own thoughts and dreams. Halfway between sleep and waking.

Morien sat, her head back on the settee, one hand still in Striker's hair, the other resting back on her shoulder. She wasn't sure if she was asleep when she felt the tall woman stir, and she let go of her hold begrudgingly.

Striker got to her feet, stretching the kinks out of her back, and smiled. "Do you want something from the drinks machine?"

"Tea, if they have it."

"They call it tea... if you want to risk it."

"Is the coffee any better?"

"No. Just disgusting in a different way."

"I'll risk the tea, then. Or anything hot and wet."

Striker lifted an eyebrow and disappeared through the double doors.

Time passed before the double doors swung again, and Striker backed through them, carefully carrying three steaming plastic cups. She gratefully placed her cargo on the table. "Is coffee okay, Asha? I wasn't sure what you'd like."

Asha roused herself and reached for the cup eagerly. "Coffee's fine, thank you."

"I hope it's okay, but I called Danny's mom again. I thought we'd better keep her in touch, you know?" Striker glanced up, almost shamefacedly. Would Asha feel she was interfering, or taking charge when she had no place to? She was finding it hard to let go of Danny. To let Asha have him... have responsibility over him.

But Asha looked grateful. "Thank you, Striker. Really...", she said, her voice insistent. "I'm not sure how I could cope with this without you."

Striker looked embarrassed, but Morien placed a hand on hers and squeezed.

Asha continued, "And you, Morien. Thank you."

"That's what friends are for," Morien replied. She took a sip of tea and made a face. "You weren't joking, were you?" she said, watching the smile appear on Striker's face, but she hazarded another mouthful, enjoying the warmth if not the taste.

"Striker," Asha ventured, "how long does an operation like this take?"

Striker shrugged, staring into her coffee. "It's hard to say. Depends on what they find and how long it takes to find it, depends on how much needs repairing, depends on..." a deep sigh, "...complications."

"Are there likely to be complications?"

Striker shrugged again. "I'm no brain surgeon..." Then she continued, "He'll probably be asleep for a long while afterwards. But if all goes well, it should only be a few hours. Knowing Dan, he'll wake up wondering where his music system is."

They all smiled.

"And if all doesn't go well?" Asha felt she had to ask.

"If he makes it through the surgery, the trauma of that, let alone the attack, might cause the brain to swell excessively. In that case, it's possible they might have to..."

"...induce coma." It was Morien who finished the sentence. And this time it was Striker who clasped Morien's hand.

They sat in silence.

* * * * *

Time passed.

Tired beyond reason, Striker was having difficulty focusing on anything. She found her eyes and her mind settling on trivial thoughts and sights, and then taking off like a disturbed fly. It fired words at her that seemed to come from nowhere. Or some dim and distant past. Or maybe some distant future.

Only your eyes are unclosed to see the black and folded town fast, and slow, asleep.

A wayward lock of Morien's hair peeped out from under her cap. In the miserable light of the corridor it gleamed a strange gold.

Striker wanted to touch it, run the soft curl through her fingers, but her attention was called by

the open pad on the coffee table.

Morien had drawn Asha: pensive, distant and beautiful. Strange how a few ink marks on a bit of paper could inspire such feeling.

And you alone can hear the invisible starfall.

Striker hadn't seen Morien's sketch of her. It was only on the page before. She could just lean forward and turn the page....

But the shoes of a passing nurse distracted her. They squeaked irritatingly on the polished floor. The floor was very polished. From here she could see the lights reflected in its surface.

Listen.

It was very quiet. She could hear the cries of someone scared and in pain in a distant ward. She could hear the squeak of the nurse's shoes echoing for what seemed like miles until it was smothered by the swish of the double doors. She could hear starfall.

Come closer.

Another door opened and Striker found herself wondering how Kishen could still look like he'd stepped from the pages of GQ after he'd been in surgery for almost six hours.

And then a sudden realisation of adrenaline launched her off the settee and across the corridor. Her actions roused the dozing Morien and Asha and both followed on her heels.

"Kish?" Striker asked breathlessly, the only word spoken in an anthem of silent questions.

"We've taken him up to the ICU. He's stable. He's more than stable. He's positively okay with it. The bleed was tough to get to, but once we got there it was routine. And Danny didn't give us any problems at all."

"No complications?" Asha asked.

"No complications. Obviously, he's not out of the woods yet. We'll have to see how the next twenty four hours affect him. We'll be monitoring him very closely and, of course, at this early stage we can't judge if his brain has sustained any permanent damage or may be adversely affected in some other way...." Kishen's eyes flicked over Morien for a moment. "But, as far as the operation goes, it was a success."

Asha started to cry, big sobbing tears of relief and Morien immediately put her arms round her friend to comfort her.

Striker was left, her mouth open, allowing the warmth of relief to seep through a body that was stiff with emotional torpor. She was vaguely aware that Kishen was still talking. "Now I'm off home to see if my wife remembers me, and to get some sleep. Unless there's anything else I can do for you?"

Striker just smiled, and held her hand out to her friend, which he took. His voice softened. "Eric will be on hand, in case anything happens, or if anybody has any other questions, okay?" Striker nodded, suddenly incapable of words, and watched as Kishen disappeared again.

"You okay?" Morien asked at her shoulder.

"I think so," Striker replied.

From where you are you can hear their dreams.

She struggled to form a coherent thought and then, "I'm gonna go call his parents, okay?"

And she went back through the double doors.

* * * * *

They had stayed on, waiting for consciousness, although whether it was Danny's or their own had become uncertain in the small hours.

Striker and Morien couldn't go home: afraid now for their lives and their sanity.

Asha couldn't go home: afraid of her parents and of leaving Danny.

And then time seemed to move again and the shift changed. Not the disordered changing of the hospital guard, but the sudden arrival of the Giboyeaux family - having spent their own sleepless

night in more comfortable surroundings, they were desperate to see their son for themselves. To give their support, to take their positions on the narrow settee and the deep armchair.

Striker made the introductions, summoned Eric Haywood to offer his reassurances, and slipped quietly outside - to be greeted by the unexpected appearance of morning.

She found the bench outside A&E where just a week ago she'd sat with Kishen and watched the personnel come and go and wondered what she was doing with her life. Now she sat alone, watching the same view, with the same pigeons picking at the same rubbish. Just like then, she was terrified of setting foot into the outside world, terrified of what she could do.

But now everything had changed. Now she was terrified of what could be done to her, and terrified of what might be done to Morien. Attacked? Pistol-whipped? Murdered?

Her head was full of death... and drunk, Welsh poet.

She lit a cigarette.

And a little while later, Morien found her - cigarette hanging from numb fingertips, her head down almost in her hands.

Morien sat, quietly, on the bench next to Striker, thinking her own thoughts, feeling her own fears, but with a quiet determination infusing her from the decision she had made.

Eventually, she spoke, a quiet voice in the wakefulness of a London morning.

"Striker," she said. "I'm going home."

Slowly, Striker sat up, straightening her back, stretching her arms, looking as if her actions were not helping in the least. "Kay," she said, "let's get you a cab."

"No, Striker, I'm going home. To Wales. To Lleudraeth." Striker looked round at her, her eyes wide. "I can't stay here. I'm scared."

Striker's mouth opened. Then closed again. A deep sense of loss was already creeping like ivy at Morien's words. What was it going to feel like when she was gone? "Oh. Well, I think that's a good idea. You get out of here. Be safe."

So that was the decision made. With Morien gone, there wouldn't be any point. She wouldn't fight the drugs charges. She'd be found guilty of dealing. She'd end up in prison. Maybe there she'd be safe, at least for a little while.

Morien regarded her for a moment. A faint puzzlement creased her brow under the cap's peak. "No, Striker. You don't understand. You're a target too... *more so*. Come with me."

Striker blinked, consciousness rippling like a waking haze. "Come with you...? To Wales?"

Morien nodded.

Striker didn't quite know what to think, and expressions warred on her tired face. Go with Morien... the thought of simply going away with Morien was so blissful she suddenly became glad she was sitting down.

But there were practicalities to think of.

"I'm on police bail. I'm due in court in a couple of days. I can't leave London."

Morien slipped off the bench, dropping to her knees in front of Striker. "Look, we'll play it by the book. We'll go to the police, as we said: tell them everything, and I mean *everything*. About my burglary, about the attack on you, about Danny, about these Bruce and Nigel blokes, about Tumblety Street. And we'll tell them where you'll be, we'll give them dad's address, and we'll let them sort out this mess."

Striker paused again, her mouth open. *Going away with Morien....* "But Danny...."

Morien put her hands on Striker's knees, leaning into them. "Danny is in the best possible place. He's got Mr Mistry looking after him... he's got his entire family in there, and he's got Asha. Striker, I need you." The breath caught in Striker's throat. "Please," Morien continued, taking the tall woman's hand in hers.

Suddenly, Striker got up, forcing Morien to get up too.

Morien momentarily wondered if she had been too forward - if Striker would think this was simply more nagging - but she needn't have worried. Striker looked at her, a fire revived in the tired blue of her eyes. "We could go back to my place, pack a few things. Can't stay too long there, though. We still don't know why they attacked Danny. But, maybe the police are still there. We could talk to them. I guess we should keep it with the guys from Clarke Street, huh? How 'bout you? We need to get you back to your flat so you can pack...."

"I don't need to pack, I have stuff at dad's already." Morien started to smile, her humour driven by Striker's renewed energy, and then moved as the tall woman started striding towards the street.

"That's good. That's great. It'll take less time." Striker was babbling and she knew it and she sure as fuck didn't care. "Hey, maybe we can hire a car. How long would it take to drive? I should have asked, can you drive?"

Morien slowed, and it was a moment before Striker realised she wasn't by her side. "What's wrong?"

"I can drive... but I had to surrender my license."

"Surrender your.... Why?"

"Striker...." Now it was Morien's turn to stand there, her mouth open, with no sound apparent. She had thought Striker knew. She had hoped Striker knew. Why was this admission as difficult as the first day she'd been diagnosed? Nothing was coming. If she thought about this then she would never say it.

So, she just said the words. "Striker, I have epilepsy. I thought you knew."

And here it was, the change: the dismay, the polite excuses, and she would be left watching Striker West's flowing dark hair disappearing into the grey, misty dawn of the metropolis.

So she was shocked when she heard the humour... *humour?*... in Striker's tone. "Some stalker I am, huh? I must have missed that." Morien looked up and the understanding in those blue eyes made her want to cry. "So, you can't drive right now. That's okay. No problem. My U.S. license is still valid... just."

No painful horror? No gushing pity? She just carries on the conversation? *I love this woman.* Morien smiled. "I'm not driving anywhere with you."

"I'm a good driver!"

"You're a good driver who hasn't slept for... how long now?"

"Just show me the nearest coffee pot."

"We're going by train. It takes ages and we have to change three times, but we can get as far as Pwllheli, then we get the bus."

Striker grew serious for a moment. "Morien, won't we be easier to follow on the train? They're still going to be after us."

"We are going by train." Morien's green eyes brooked now argument.

"Nag," said Striker. "Hang on... back up. We have to change *three* times?! Where is this place? Llareggub?"

"Heavens no, that's easier to get to."

Continued in Chapter 14....

¹ "Attercop" - one of the names invented by Bilbo Baggins to tease the giant spiders in *The Hobbit* by J.R.R. Tolkien

² A reference to Ted Hughes's anti-hero Crow. If I had the time and space to begin to describe Crow then I would. Unfortunately, I don't, but lots of other people on the Internet have.

³ *Brawd bach* = little brother

⁴ "Marry, this is miching mallecho; it means mischief" - Hamlet, Act III, Scene 2

⁵ The title and all italicized references later in the chapter are from the beginning of Dylan Thomas's "Under Milk Wood" - a play for voices set in the fictional town of Llareggub. I'd recommend that you try and get hold of an audiobook of this, rather than simply reading it - firstly because that's how it was intended to be enjoyed, and secondly, because it's a wonderful example of how beautiful the Welsh accent can be.

The Athenaeum's Scroll Archive

~ Misplaced People ~

by Devize

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Chapter 14: *The Lobster Quadrille*¹

But first they had to get to the police station.

The Underground trains seemed to be stretching and warming up for the day and the two women found the carriages almost deserted to begin with.

They found themselves talking, despite themselves. Striker asked about Lleudraeth, Morien answered with anecdotes and information. It was something to plan for, something to look forward to. It was surface-level chatter to side-step a weight of reality that was beginning to crush them.

They got off at Striker's local station, with the High Street waking up. Ten minutes down the road was the remains of the Boom Shack. They couldn't see it, but it was if they could still smell the devastation. Neither of them acknowledged it, but skirted round the knowledge as they skirted round the emergent traffic.

A brief walk and the dingy estate was quiet. Although still echoing with the memories of flashing lights and danger, the police were gone, the bystanders had stolen back to their homes, and there was no sign of life. No sign of possible death.

Carefully, they made their way back to the apartment, up the stairs, along the deserted walkway. Here and there were signs of life among the neighbours - the sound of a radio, the flick of a curtain, but no humanity.

"They could have cleaned," Striker murmured as she set foot through the door.

Morien said nothing. She couldn't tell the difference.

Until she saw the spots of blood on the wall, where yesterday she'd been mopping up stagnant water and dead flowers.

"Do you want me to tidy up?" she asked Striker.

Striker was grateful for the offer, but answered truthfully. "I guess this is a crime scene. They might have finished for now, but I guess it ought to stay for a little longer, especially in view of what we're about to do." She disappeared into her bedroom calling behind her, "If you need anything... use the bathroom... anything like that... help yourself."

Morien stood for a moment, listening to Striker moving around in the bedroom. She could hear the creak of the wardrobe door, the scrape of battered drawers opening. She stared at the blood on the paintwork, unwillingly imagining what had happened in this apartment barely twelve hours before: Danny confronted by strangers. Had it been the quick, heavy, unexpected blow to the head that had changed her life, or had he struggled? And what more had these men - Nigel and Bruce - what more had they wanted, if it hadn't been to warn the two witnesses who had stumbled into the little chapel?

"How far is it to the police station from here?" she called, staring at the closed front door, and wondering how long it would take for somebody to kick it in.

"Clarke Street's off the High Street; bit further up from the Tube."

"Not far then?"

"No, not far."

Morien almost jumped out of her skin when the letter box clacked and mail bumped onto the carpet by the door. Without thinking she picked it up, glancing through it. A couple of bills; junk mail; a music magazine for Danny; a letter, something official, addressed to Striker.

No, not addressed to Striker, addressed to R. S. B. West.

Maybe she was Striker after all.

Intrigued though she was, the sound of footsteps on the walkway outside drew Morien's attention away from the letters. They were only passing, not stopping. Maybe just the postman again, she reasoned, but wondered whether it would be overly dramatic to push the couch in front of the

door for the duration of their stay. Instead, she merely slipped the chain across, ensured the latches were down, and, throwing the mail onto the table, moved to the bathroom. She wanted to wash the grime of the chapel and a hospital night from her face. She needed to take her pills.

She caught herself smiling at herself in the mirror as a sudden thought struck her. Funny, considering she'd just locked the two of them away from the outside world, and funny, considering the bathroom door was firmly shut... but, suddenly, here with Striker, she felt as if she didn't need to hide anymore.

She took her cap off and, for the first time, watched herself as she swallowed the hated medication in a mouthful of water.

But she still doesn't fancy you, anghenfil. ²

Besides, why should she be surprised that Striker wasn't fazed by her epilepsy. She was a doctor, wasn't she?

She bent over the basin. The cold water felt good on her skin. She ran a wet hand through her hair, unconsciously lingering over the scar, as always.

"Hey, Morien, you okay?" she heard through the door.

"Yes, fine. Just waking myself up a bit." She towelled her face dry, the friction itself reviving her, and opened the door.

Striker was right outside as Morien emerged. She was about to go into the bathroom, but stopped as she saw her shorter friend and her eyes crinkled. To Morien's surprise, she reached out and ruffled her fingers through her damp hair. Morien wasn't sure what to make of the gesture, but glimpsed only fondness on Striker's face as she dived into the bathroom. She was gone for a few moments, and Morien heard splashing water. Then she re-emerged, her face clean and her hands full of toiletries.

"Hey, Striker," Morien called.

"Mmm?"

"Your post's arrived." She nodded at the letters.

Striker scowled. "Probably just crap I can't pay." Juggling bottles, she picked up the official-looking letter and managed to tear it open without dropping anything. She smirked as she read it. "Well, whaddya know," she muttered. "I've been fired from my job." She threw the paper down and headed out of the sitting room, mumbling expletives under her breath.

As she entered the bedroom, Striker stopped, trying to remember what she was doing. Her mind didn't seem to be working any more. She looked longingly at her bed. Her lovely, big bed. It would be so easy just to curl up and sleep. Curl up and hide from the world. Curl up and hide

under the duvet with Morien. Yeah.... But the world wouldn't let them hide. The world would come knocking on the door... or simply break it down - probably advising them by formal letter after the event... so they had to go and confront it.

She sighed, and swayed slightly on her aching feet. That was it. She had to pack. She arranged her armful of bottles and washing sundries in the suitcase - idly hoping the shampoo wouldn't leak - and added another pair of jeans, following them with another couple of t-shirts. Then cleaned out her underwear drawer.

She heard Morien's voice from the living room, drifting to and fro like a sound wave. Striker was unsure whether Morien was speaking another language or she was losing the power of understanding spoken English. "Hi, dad, it's me. Um... I know it's a little short notice, but could me and a friend come and stay for a few days?... Are you sure that's okay?... Dw i'n iawn, tad. I ddweud y gwir³ ... we're in a little bit of trouble. Um... we'll probably have to have a chat with Idomeneo...."

And Morien must have moved because the rest of the sentence was muffled by space.

Striker stared at the suitcase, already occupied by books. It was going to be heavy to carry but she sure as hell wasn't going to leave it here. She checked in the back pocket - filled with carefully folded, carefully bound bundles of paper - and pulled out the old copy of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, and within, the tattered photograph. She stared at the image as if committing it to memory.

Her tired mind registered a word, a feeling, a touch.

Maybe it was the tiny creak of the door, or the almost silent beep of her mobile phone as Morien switched it off, but Striker looked up to see Morien framed in the doorway.

Morien felt as if she'd interrupted a private conversation. She was going to make her excuses, apologise, turn and leave, but instead she found Striker handing her the photograph.

The colour was so faded it was almost sepia. It had been folded and re-folded and was criss-crossed with lines and time. But the image was clear.

It was as if she was looking at Striker: a face whose shapes and planes she'd sketched in the hospital just the night before. A clear, intelligent, blue gaze. A gentle, almost solemn smile played on the faded lips. But her hair was light - it must have been a dark blonde.

A different woman, from a different place and a different age. It was almost frightening how like her mother Striker was.

Morien looked up, into the same gaze, but this one was desperate for approval. The breath caught in her throat at the trust Striker had placed in her. She would not let her down. She smiled at Striker, a reassuring, honest smile, and said, "She's beautiful."

"She is, isn't she?" Striker's face was almost childlike with the pleasure of Morien's words. She reached out to take the photograph back from Morien, and smiled as she felt Morien's fingers linger against her hand. "I'll find her one day," she said. Then tucked the photograph safely back in its book, into the suitcase and closed the lid. And then her voice changed, lowered, and her eyes became shrouded. "I guess we better get this over with, huh?"

* * * * *

Striker slammed the front door behind them, pushing on it to make sure it was well and truly closed. Then, checking around the waking neighbourhood, they made their way down the stairs, Striker bumping the suitcase in front of her.

Now there were signs of movement here and there: a mother shouting at her petulant children as she herded them across the estate; a dog sniffing round a gathering of dustbins; a drunk trying to negotiate a kerb.

"How far?" Morien asked, her heart in her throat.

"Five minutes if we're fast." Her voice was sharp, urgent.

"Striker..."

"I know, I see them...."

They had reached the main entrance to the estate where it greeted the High Street, and to their left, standing nonchalantly on a corner further up the road, was a small group of skinheads. They seemed indifferent to the time of the morning, or that their quarry had just shown themselves, only seeming concerned about an empty drinks can which they were kicking about the pavement with shouts of invective-laden merriment. But both Striker and Morien felt razor-sharp eyes on them, and as they moved to cross the road they were aware of a shift in the group... a casual tap of the can in their direction.

The traffic was building, and the two women ran the gauntlet of buses, cars and angry horns as they dodged their way to the other side of the street. They were now parallel to the ghoul, as the impromptu game of kick-the-can was abandoned and the women found themselves shadowed across the road. Morien and Striker sped up, close to running, Morien's bag bouncing against her side, the suitcase banging painfully against Striker's leg. She shifted it up, wondering if she could swing the heavy burden fast enough and high enough for it to be an effective weapon if needed.

"Striker..." Morien's voice was high with fear.

Striker looked up, ahead of them. She could see, in the distance, the turning to Clarke Street, their way to the police station and safety, and on that corner a second cluster of skinheads had suddenly appeared as if spat out by the morning.

"Holy *shit*."

They stopped dead.

"What are we going to do?"

"I don't know."

"They wouldn't try anything, would they? I mean, it's broad daylight... there are too many people about."

"I don't know... but we're fucked. We can't get to Clarke Street."

"Then what do we do?"

Striker was getting angry. Angry with the skinheads, angry with Morien for expecting her to have all the answers, and especially angry at life. But she was too tired to be angry. She was too tired to feel any kind of emotion save a savage amusement, tinged with complete disbelief. For a moment, she was still clinging on to the dilapidated roof of the Salem Chapel, dizzy and disoriented, and then the High Street had turned into Wonderland and she and Morien were waltzing down it.

They had overtaken the first group of ghouls who were now idling a little further back, watching them, waiting for their next move. The second group were laughing and joking among themselves - Striker could swear that one of them was looking at them, beckoning, grinning. And as she watched a car pulled up to the kerb a little further up. A smart sports car, royal blue, expensive and shining. It embodied masculinity, it embodied power, and in the front seat sat two large, suited men.

Striker vividly remembered the feeling of the gun barrel pressed to her forehead, and the mess a single bullet could make of a face She looked around, looking for anything... anything... that could get them out of there.

Shops were opening - she recognised the newsagent a little way ahead. Some shopkeepers were setting up stalls on the pavement to display their cheaper wares: a hardware store, a greengrocer, a florist....

"Striker..." She felt Morien grab her arm and nod down the road.

"And they say they're never around when you need them," Striker murmured. Turning out of a side road was a police car. It turned onto the High Street, heading in their direction, and pulled up almost opposite to them. Two policemen got out. Both were rapt in conversation and neither seemed to notice the groups of skinheads, the besieged women, or the elegant car that was causing a potential obstruction, all of whom were watching their arrival avidly.

Morien yelled, trying to catch their attention, but her shout was swallowed by the roar of a passing bus.

Traffic was moving fast now. Striker pulled Morien out of the way of a taxi as she tried to cross the road. Still the police officers were oblivious.

Besides, Striker thought, it wouldn't be enough just to talk to them. They were going to have to get out of this situation with an escort. Striker looked round her again, at the shops, the stalls. She looked at the ghouls, she looked at the sports car, she looked at the policemen.... "Morien, I've just had a really bad idea."

"It'd better be a really good bad idea."

She was moving now, down the street, calling after her. "Remember I told you how I got my name..."

"Yes, baseball, but..."

Striker reached the greengrocers; fruit and vegetables were neatly laid out on the stall. Striker dropped her suitcase. "Well, it's been a while, but...." And a large tomato whizzed across the cars on the busy street and landed with a ripe, juicy splat on the helmet of the unsuspecting police officer.

Striker grinned. "Hey not bad. I still got it...." And she took another tomato and lobbed it across the road. Morien's mouth opened, not sure whether to laugh or scream at Striker, instead she found herself confronted by a furious greengrocer.

"What the hell's she doing?"

"Um... it's a little complicated, but she's saving our backsides." Another tomato whizzed across the road, and Morien reached for her purse.

The astonished police officer followed his colleague's finger and raced across the street, dodging traffic, shouting, "Stop! Police!"

Well, duh...! "Don't worry," Striker yelled back. "We're not moving." She thrust a tomato into Morien's hand, immediately implicating her in the crime. Up and down the pavement, the two groups of ghouls were staring, their mouths open.

"What the hell are you doing?" The policeman arrived, sputtering and damp with tomato seeds creating a new and interesting design on his uniform white shirt.

"Sorry about that, it was kinda necessary."

"Necessary? Are you drunk?"

"No, just *extremely* tired. Are you going to arrest us?"

The policeman goldfished. It was his colleague that replied. "Hell, yes."

They were marched across the road, accompanied by their newly acquired crossing guard and a building and slightly hysterical glee, and helped into the back seat of the police car, the suitcase being carefully stowed in the boot.

"I can't believe you did that," Morien said in an undertone, reaching for Striker's hand as the police car moved into traffic.

"Got us out of there, didn't it?" Striker couldn't help but wave at the astonished faces of Nigel and Bruce as they passed the sports car, and they swept around the corner of Clarke Street in style.

"You're a genius," Morien whispered.

"Nah, just a damn good pitcher," Striker said, disappointed that the journey was already over as the car was parked in the yard. "You ready for this?"

Morien nodded, squeezing her hand.

Striker bent close to Morien. "They know now. The moment we step out of this police station they're going to be after us."

"Come on. Out." The damp and red-tinged constable opened the door on Striker's side and jerked his thumb in the direction of the building.

"They're after us anyway. What have we got to lose?" Morien replied. She brought Striker's hand up and brought it to her lips. Then with a smile, she slid out of the car.

The custody area was empty, only occupied by the imposing figure of the sergeant behind his desk. A man this time: solemn and humourless, and when told of the charges, his scowl seemed to deepen. Plainly, he was unimpressed and annoyed that these two women were here at all.

Then, Striker spoke. "Sir, we have information."

"Information?" He drawled the word, and raised an eyebrow, cynicism written in every line of his face.

"My name is Striker West. I was arrested late Thursday night for drug offences. We have information on the arson attack on the Boom Shack night club, the assault of Danny Giboyeaux on the Bronte Estate yesterday afternoon, the murder of one of the Boom Shack employees..." she could sense Morien's head flick round in surprise, "...and a very big stash of cocaine."

The sergeant lifted his other eyebrow.

* * * * *

Five hours.

They were separated.

Striker had to wait for the arrival of the sallow-faced solicitor and was shown into a cell. The same cell. "Home from home," she murmured as she lay down on the hard bed and allowed herself to drift off.

Her waking dreams were full of blood and flight, and bullets red and soft and exploding with seeds, as she was chased through the snaking corridors of St Vincent's. And around every corner she found Bruce or Nigel, gun in hand, trying to push her down and pull the trigger - the shot would ring in her ears, and around the walls and she would wonder if she was dead; but then another corner and Danny would be there, soundlessly calling for her as blood dripping down his head from a gaping head wound; only to back up and find Pully, his face a destruction of flesh and brain, his gold tooth jiggling, his arms outstretched as he begged her for help.

And nowhere could she find Morien, but she kept hearing her voice. A quiet, Welsh lyric that would whisper in her ear, "Please don't leave me. I need you."

And the cell door creaked open and there were other voices.

"Miss West," the plain-clothed detective asked, "are you trying to make some deal so we drop the drugs charges for this so-called information?"

Striker blinked, her mind crawling back from sleep. It was the same detective that had interviewed her on Thursday night. "No," she said, swinging her legs onto the floor. "If you want to go ahead with the drugs charges then go ahead. I'm giving you this information because it's the right thing to do. And because my friend and I need your help. Now if you can forget about the tomatoes...."

The detective chuckled. "Come on," he said.

* * * * *

"I suppose I have to go back to February."

Five hours of exposition.

The detective flicked through some paperwork in front of him. "It says here you were attacked in

February but no one has been caught. Is that right?"

"Yes, that's right. I had no idea at the time who would have done that to me. I do now, and I know why as well."

"Well?"

"I believe their names are Bruce and Nigel, or else it was one of their... friends. I'm afraid I don't know their surnames."

"And why would these men want to attack you?"

"Because I was interested in the Salem Chapel on Tumblety Street."

"This is about a chapel?"

"It's about what they're using the chapel for."

"And what are they using the chapel for?"

"To store drugs."

"And how do you know this?"

"Because I've seen them."

* * * * *

"These two brothers planted the crack on you because...."

"Warning. Payback."

"Payback? What did you do?"

Striker paused. "I... I kinda kicked Bruce in the face."

There was a pause. "You kicked... *Bruce*... in the face?"

Striker nodded, and watched as the detective glanced at his companion. There was a strange respect in his eyes.

Five hours of two-way knowledge.

Striker fixed him in her gaze. "You *know* them."

* * * * *

"You've only heard of this Bruce and Nigel through Miss West?"

"I believe what Striker's told me, yes."

"But what do *you* know, Miss Llewelyn?"

"I know the name Gilbert Lamprey." Morien liked the silence that the name instilled.

"How do you know the name Gilbert Lamprey?"

"He's employed by the council."

"You've seen him at the council building?"

"No, I've never seen him and his telephone number is unobtainable. But he's listed... *was* listed... as an employee, as caretaker for various council buildings: a couple of warehouses, the chapel on Tumblety Street. I did have documentary evidence of this, but the file was stolen when Striker was attacked."

"So, you're saying the council is involved in this?"

"I think someone at the council must be involved, yes."

Five hours of going round in circles.

"And you think this is why you were attacked back in February, and why your flat was burgled a few days ago?"

* * * * *

Five hours of teas and coffees and police officers' *Excuse me's* and detectives leaving and arriving and whispered discussions behind half-closed doors and questions and answers, while exhaustion tap-danced on their eyelids.

Morien sat in the custody area. Her eyes closed now, but not asleep. She waited and listened, enjoying the fact that it was over. Enjoying the quiet. She didn't have to see her to know that Striker had been brought in.

Five hours without her.

She smiled and rose to meet her friend. "I've given them dad's address."

"You okay? You look tired."

Morien smiled. "You look tireder," she said, and gave Striker a hug. "We've done it," she whispered. Striker felt heavy in her arms, the exhaustion of two days without sleep weighed them both down.

"We've done it," Striker whispered. "They've joined the dance."

"Excuse me," said the freshly-shirted constable. "I've been told to give you a lift to Paddington station...."

Chapter 15: *Into this wild abyss*⁴

Now, Striker was irritated.

Their police escort had not allowed her to smoke in the car. There was no smoking in the train station, where it had taken an age to buy expensive tickets - for which Morien had insisted on paying.

The first train had been crowded, and the two of them had perched on the suitcase in the train's corridor; Striker shaking silently from exhaustion and need, while those around them threw pitying or disgusted glances at her - the words 'drug addict' and 'tramp' in their eyes as they took in her still dusty appearance.

And now she was informed by the unapologetic Welsh woman that there was no smoking on the second train either.

"I want a cigarette," Striker said, sounding and feeling like a petulant two-year-old.

"I want to go home, and as this train leaves in about sixty seconds, I am *not* waiting another two hours for the next one just because you want to give yourself and everyone around you lung cancer." Morien's voice softened. "Take this as an opportunity to cut down a bit."

"I haven't slept in over fifty fucking hours. This is not a good time to cut down my nicotine intake."

"I'm not getting off this train. If you want to, you're on your own." There was a silent battle of wills, until the train jolted to a start, proving Morien's point.

A brief but loud expletive exploded from Striker, which had shocked heads popping up from

behind seats in the busy carriage. But she ignored the stares, and climbed over Morien to make it to the aisle and through the carriage door. For one brief moment, Morien wondered if she was going to jump off a moving train for the sake of a cigarette, but as there was no screeching of breaks or shocked screams, she assumed not. Or maybe she had jumped off without anyone noticing and would be found sometime later, half-asleep in a happy fog of cigarette smoke, lost in the middle of Berkshire.

Morien refused to worry.

She relaxed into her seat. Allowing the gentle rocking of the train to lull her into a kind of meditation. She wasn't sure how much time had passed, but suddenly she was jogged out of her reverie by a crash on the table in front of her.

Striker had returned with a number of paper bags.

"What's that?" she asked.

"The buffet," Striker replied, climbing back over her, to the annoyance of the businessman who was sharing a table with them. She gave him a look that would have had a weaker man shrinking into the upholstery. "If I can't smoke I'm gonna eat."

She extracted sandwiches, crisps, pastries, chocolate bars, two bottles of water, and four steaming cups of liquid. She handed one to Morien, and the smell of filter coffee reached the Welsh woman's greedy nose.

Morien looked curiously at the other three cups. "What's in there?"

"Coffee."

"Who're they for?"

"Me." Morien looked at her. "What?"

"Three?"

"They didn't have bigger cups, okay?" Striker's tone didn't contain a single hint of humour.

"Fine." Morien sipped at her coffee - a completely different drink to the brown liquid they'd been given at the police station.

They ate in silence for a while, the English countryside rushing beneath their feet; the train rattling in time; Striker's fingers tapping against the emptying coffee cups, drumming against the table. Morien could feel the seat shaking beneath her as Striker's body buzzed with the dangerous mixture of exhaustion, caffeine and nicotine withdrawal.

She watched as Striker's hand disappeared inside her jacket and brought out her packet of

cigarettes. She pulled one of the little sticks out of the pack and rolled it between her fingers. Backwards and forwards, backwards and forwards....

The businessman looked at the cigarette in horror. Striker ignored him.

Morien tidied some of the debris left by their impromptu meal - much to their table-mate's relief - and with the table cleared, she reached for her sketchpad.

And returned to her new favourite subject. She glanced at Striker. The cigarette was still rolled lovingly in her fingers. She was staring out of the window into a blur of anonymous green and grey that rushed past. Lost in England, lost in her own thoughts.

Morien's fingers were used to the patterns now: the planes of her cheeks were familiar... the straight nose just turning up at the end... the dark shadows under her eyes... the flow of the hair. She glanced at the sketch and wondered who she was drawing: mother or daughter?

She wondered about the woman who had apparently deserted her daughter so long ago, a daughter she quite obviously loved. It didn't make sense. And what had Striker been left with? Had her father loved her?

"Doesn't your dad know anything?" The question slipped out before she'd even thought about the words or the situation... or Striker's mood.

Striker turned slowly, as if tearing her gaze from the blur outside. She looked at Morien, taking in the slightly nervous expression that had settled on the smaller woman's face, and then the sketch in front of her. Morien thought she saw a glimpse... just the tiniest glimpse... of a smile.

Striker rolled the cigarette between her fingers and settled back in her seat. Her voice was soft. "Dad would go ape-shit if he knew I was looking for my mother. Besides, dad and I... we're not exactly talking these days."

She slipped the cigarette into her mouth, her lips almost embracing it.

"I'm sorry," Morien said and she genuinely meant it. "May... may I ask why?"

There was a humourless chuckle round the unlit cigarette. "Sure you can ask. We had a... disagreement. He told me I was pissing my life away. Those were his exact words." Striker's voice went deep and humorously threatening. "'You're thirty years old and what the hell are you doing with your life? You've got no future.' He was right. I *am* pissing my life away."

"How can you say that?" Morien asked. "You've got a good job, a worthwhile job. Most parents would be proud to have a doctor for a...."

Striker's head shot up so quickly that they could almost hear the whipcrack. Her eyes were a startling blue. Her voice was quiet, amazed, shocked.... "I'm not a doctor."

Morien stared. "But you work in A&E at St Vincent's. Weren't you with the crash team?"

"I can't believe you thought that.... Shit, this is embarrassing." She turned back to the window, unable to meet Morien's gaze.

Morien stuttered, unsure of what to say. "Are... are you a nurse?"

"Morien...", Striker said. She felt ashamed, disgusted with herself, terrified at Morien's reaction, and painfully aware of the prying businessman. "Morien, I work with the A&E staff, it's true... but... I'm a..." she said the last word so quietly, Morien strained to hear it, "...porter."

Morien's forehead creased in puzzlement. "A... *porter*? But... what were you doing when I was...?"

"They asked me to... push your trolley. It meant they were free to...."

And Striker's voice trailed off.

Morien looked at her, or tried to. Striker's face was now hidden by the familiar curtain of long, dark hair. She focused instead on Striker's hands, clenched on her knees, the cigarette bent between two fingers. Her hands were big and rough-looking. There was a tiny scar over one knuckle on her right hand. Morien touched it with the tip of a finger.

"Well," she said, "you're one hell of a porter."

Striker closed her eyes, the need to cry almost overwhelming. She felt lost. She felt mortified. She felt physically ill with pain and tiredness. So she resorted to the single thing that was familiar, and was currently unfurling itself like a scorpion's sting inside.

Anger.

"Move," she said. Her voice was cold.

"What?"

Striker tore her hand away from Morien's touch. "Get out the way."

Morien got up and moved into the aisle. "Striker, have I said...?"

Striker pushed past her and disappeared through the carriage door.

Morien stood for a moment, wondering what to do. She glanced at the businessman. He hurriedly buried himself behind his newspaper, determined not to get involved. Half in and half out of her seat, she paused, her heart beating in her throat.

And she realised, with devastating clarity, that she was scared of Striker. The woman who had

just stormed out of the carriage was not the gentle, caring woman with whom Morien had fallen head-over-heels in love. That woman was hidden behind a mask of rage and insecurity.

And a closed carriage door.

Do I really want to be with someone like that? Who can turn on me in an instant?

She thought of Sophie. They never fought. Disagreements, sure; annoyances, of course. But never the cold, blind rage she had caught in Striker's eyes as she pushed past.

How much of who or what she believed Striker to be was her own fantasy?

What did she know of her? She'd lost her mother. She didn't get on with her father. And her first name began with an R.

And she'd read fairy stories to her when Morien had been nothing more to her than a dying stranger.

There was something beyond that anger that Morien wanted to understand. And maybe that gentle, caring woman simply needed rescuing, which is why she stood, and opened the carriage door.

Striker was standing in the corridor. She'd pulled the window down and was now leaning out, smoking.

Morien stood and watched her for a moment, her presence disguised by the rush of the wind on Striker's face. The dark hair, now completely loose, flowed down the broad back, caught by flurries of breeze. The black leather jacket, a second skin, stretched over wide shoulders. The long, jean-clad legs, ending in the big, black boots, one of which tapped in agitation against the train door.

Finally, Morien spoke, her voice rising above the rush of the train and the wind. "Striker."

She could see the leather-clad shoulders tense. The head moved slightly to one side, so Morien could see the glimpse of a profile. "What do you want?"

"I want to talk to you."

"Bout what?"

"I want to make sure you're okay."

Striker sucked in her cheeks as she inhaled and blew out smoke which was torn away by the wind. "What do you care?"

"You're my friend."

Striker exhaled and Morien could see smoke coming from her nose. "Why?"

"What do you mean 'why'?"

And now Striker turned round. "I mean, why the fuck are you hanging out with someone like me? I'm a complete fuck-up. My dad's right, I've pissed my life away."

"Striker...."

"Look at me, Morien," she grabbed Morien's face. "Look at me. Do I look like a doctor? I'm a stalker, a college drop-out. Now I've got police records on two continents. I can't keep a job. Jesus...." She turned away. "You thought I was a doctor, and I can't even keep a job as a fucking hospital porter."

"Striker...."

"For Christ's sake, Morien, why the hell are you always so nice to me?"

"Because you are nice."

"Nice?! No I'm not, I'm a bitch. I've done some shitty things in my life."

"Like what?"

And now she turned back and smiled. It was the kind of smile that made Morien shiver; a kind of cold, wolfish snarl. Her voice was quiet, icy. "Do you know how close I was to becoming your worst nightmare?"

Morien stared up at Striker. "What do you mean?"

"I've tried to justify what I did. I followed you because I cared about you, that's true. But those phone calls you got, they could have been me."

"But it wasn't you, it was...."

"I've done it."

"Done what? Striker, I don't under...."

"You know what it's like? To be *so* scared of losing someone you want, someone you care about, that you can't sleep, can't eat, you can't do anything but think about them... what they're doing, who they're with, whether they're thinking of you. So you pick up the phone and dial the number. And the first few times you do it, you'll say something, 'Hi, how you doing? Only me.' But eventually it'll come... *that* phrase.... You're waiting for it: 'You don't have to phone me all the time, you know.' And then you can't say anything. You'll still call, just to see if they're home, just

to hear their voice. But if they're home you can't say anything so you hang up. And if they're out you start going nuts and wondering where they are and who they're with. So, you call again, or you try their cellphone, and you keep trying 'til they answer and then you don't know what to say, so you hang up. Or they don't answer so you start obsessing and you go to where they live and wait outside 'til you see them, or you go find them, see who they're out with, instead of you. You follow them, you spy on them, you spook them. You start scaring them, stealing from them, threatening them, I mean scaring the shit out of them - letting them know that you're in control now - and, fuck, it makes you feel *so good*, because it means that you *mean* something to them. Suddenly you're important - the most important thing in their world, because you're the person who's destroying them."

Striker's head snapped round to meet Morien's horrified expression. "Am I scaring you, little girl?" she asked. Her face came close to Morien's. They were sharing air, their lips barely centimetres apart. "That's what I was going to do to you. That's what I could have done. You want a nightmare? I can be yours."

"Are you all right? Can I help at all?" A middle-aged man in a striped pullover stood behind Morien, a would-be warrior hero, wielding not a sword but a paper bag from the buffet car. He looked at Striker. "You know, you're not supposed to smoke on this train."

For a moment, there was an ire in Striker's eyes that destroyed time. The look of hatred fermented the tension. Morien could sense the violence in her, clawing at its bindings. Striker's propensity to hurt shone out of her like the sun behind a thundercloud.

Morien reached out and caught Striker's wrist. She could feel the blood pounding beneath her fingers.

"No, thank you," she said to the gentleman, "we're fine." He moved on, although glancing backwards to assure her words.

There was a silence that couldn't be penetrated, even by the rattle of the train and the sound of land moving beneath their feet.

Striker's attention was drawn back through the window, the remains of her cigarette, caught between two fingers, fascinating on the sill.

Morien still held her wrist. She opened her mouth, and this time it was her voice that was angry, loud and cold. "And *you*," she said, "can stop being so bloody stupid."

Striker turned with a look of disbelief on her face.

"What you've done in the past is wrong," Morien continued. "It's bloody awful. You scared people. You hurt people who might have cared for you. But you *know* that what you did was wrong." Her grip on Striker's wrist loosened, but she didn't let go. "And what you've given me is support and kindness and unthinking generosity at the expense of your friends, your job and your own safety." Striker's eyes were round and shone fresh blue like the sky after a storm. "And

know this, Striker West," Morien said, losing herself, just for a moment, in those eyes, "whether you like it or not, I love you for it."

And she reached up and placed a sweet, tender kiss on the side of Striker's mouth. Not a lover's kiss, or a friend's kiss, but something agonisingly in-between. And then she disappeared through the carriage door, leaving Striker alone with her mouth open.

And her cigarette burning up to her fingers.

Ouch. Shit.

She flipped the stick out of the window and stuck her fingers in her mouth, feeling stupid. *Bloody stupid.*

The kiss still tingled at the side of her mouth. The caress of Morien's lips: tender, sweet and infinitely magical. She felt like a frog who'd just discovered its humanity.

And her humanity had auburn hair, green eyes and the softest lips imaginable.

In any other lifetime, in any other story, she would have felt too ashamed of herself to return to her seat. But in this story, with this princess, she couldn't keep away. She opened the carriage door and stepped inside.

Morien was now sitting by the window. Much as she liked the thought of Striker on top of her, she knew she was running the risk of getting something crushed if she let the tall American climb over her again in those heavy boots. She had returned to her pad, and having added a few finishing touches to the quick sketch, she was now doodling initials underneath: R. S. B. W. complete with Gothic-style flourishes. Striker's admission had concerned her, niggled at her as she drew, but the concern was being overwhelmed by the memory of the low, sweet voice whispering of princes and princesses and fairy curses, until she wondered if Striker had ever fallen out with a godmother.

R....

Ruth...

Rebecca...

Rachel...

None of them seemed to suit Striker.

There was a whisper in her ear. "Tell me to stop being so bloody stupid again."

Morien grinned. "Stop being so bloody stupid."

"I love that accent." Striker settled herself in the seat next to her.

"So, are you going to stop being so bloody stupid?"

"Probably not. I have a lot of stupidity left in me yet." She looked over Morien's shoulder at the sketch. "You're really good. D'you ever make any money out of it?"

"No. That's what I aspired to when I was at university, but things got in the way, you know? Work, girlfriend, getting hit over the head...."

Striker thought for a moment. "Morien, would you... would you paint something for me?"

Morien looked up at her friend. "Like a commission?"

"Yes. A commission." Striker looked momentarily uncomfortable. "I... I couldn't afford to pay you right now... the way things have gone... but I will. I'll pay you."

"Striker, I wouldn't dream of taking money from you. I mean, I'd be happy to do anything for you... paint anything...."

Striker smiled. "You know that photo I showed you... of my mother?" Morien nodded. "Could you paint that?"

Morien thought about the photograph. The colours were so faded, she would need help if Striker wanted it exact. But there was only one answer she could give. "Yes, of course. Striker, I'd be honoured."

And Striker blessed her with an expression which was so full of gratitude, so full of warmth and love and joy that Morien wondered how she could ever look away. If they hadn't been in a crowded train carriage, if it hadn't been for the frustrated businessman, if it hadn't been for her own fear of the consequences - Morien knew she would have kissed her, and lost herself... on that beautiful, full mouth....

Striker winced and glared at the businessman, and Morien realised there was a war for legroom going on underneath the table. She had just got the sweet Striker back, she wasn't going to lose her for the sake of bootspace. She was about to offer to change seats again, when they pulled in at a station. And a table became free across from them. With a huff and a glare at Striker, the businessman gathered his belongings and moved.

Striker sighed contentedly, put her feet up on the seat opposite and closed her eyes. She was quiet for a while. Morien thought she'd fallen asleep, and turned her attention back to the sketch of Striker. She wondered how she was going to approach the portrait of Striker's mother. She had the perfect model in her daughter, but the colouring....

A voice pierced her thoughts. She looked round as Striker started speaking. She still had her eyes closed.

"You asked why I'm not talking to my dad nowadays. Truth is, forty eight hours after he'd lectured me on responsibility, he drank a bottle and a half of bourbon and drove into a kid."

"Oh my God...."

"Which makes it kind of difficult to talk to him now. He's in a correctional facility in Pennsylvania."

"Striker, I'm so sorry."

"Don't feel sorry for me. Feel sorry for the kid. Feel sorry for her family."

Morien waited for more, but there was no more to be had. For now. Instead, she returned to the sketch. And it prompted a question. "Striker, is your name Rebecca?"

The corners of Striker's mouth turned up. "No."

Morien frowned. *There goes the Daphne du Maurier theory.*

She opened her mouth and wondered how Striker knew she was going to speak with her eyes still closed. "Morien," Striker said. "Don't."

* * * * *

They crossed the border.

Nothing seemed to change. The scenery was still green. The sky was still blue and white and grey. The train still rattled and creaked. The carriage, now less crowded, still maintained the hum of conversation.

But something had changed. Morien had said the words very quietly, as if only to herself, "We're in Wales," but the words instilled an excitement and relief that revitalised them both.

But neither of them moved. Striker stayed with her feet up on the opposite seat, long legs stretched under the table, eyes closed. To all intents and purposes asleep. She thought of escape. She thought of rest.

And Morien sat, her temple against the headrest, watching her country go by in a blur. *Home.* The word echoed through her mind, thrilled through her veins, and found itself on her pad, surrounded by flowers. *Home.*

* * * * *

Another station. They sat and waited for the train to Pwllheli on a hard, wooden bench. A Welsh station this time. Signs in two languages. Loudspeaker announcements in a haze of half-understood sound. The sky here was a perfect blue, the sun sinking into the west, but it was humid, as if the weather as well as lack of sleep was heavy on them. Striker felt as if she was fading under the weight.

Another crowded train. They found a corner seat and Striker curled up, sinking into the worn upholstery. She was aware that this would be the last train before their destination, but the fact wasn't helping the headache that had seemed to descend with the humidity, or the aching of every single muscle in her battered body. All she wanted to do... right now more than find her mother... right now more than kiss every inch of Morien's skin...

...was sleep.

Except she couldn't. The carriage was unpleasantly warm, despite the open windows. And each time she closed her eyes and felt herself begin to drift, the train would clatter, a raucous laugh would explode from somewhere down the aisle, a mobile phone would blare some intrusive jingle, or the guard would pass requesting tickets.

Or she'd suddenly jerk herself to consciousness with the thought of Danny or Pully or the cold-steel hell they'd left behind.

Morien stroked Striker's overgrown fringe away from her damp forehead. "Hey, cariad," she whispered, below the rattle of the train and the voices around them, "hang on in there. Only a little way to go now."

Striker opened her eyes: a burst of light blue in the middle of a grey sky face, half-lost between dark alleys and crowded trains. "It's going to get better, isn't it? It's going to be different now, isn't it?"

"Yes, it's going to be different. We can rest, okay?"

"No more bad guys?"

"No more bad guys."

A silence.

"Morien..." Her eyes were closed again. Morien wondered if she was even aware she had spoken.

"Mmm...?"

"I feel like I'm hungover without the fun part."

Morien chuckled, stifling a yawn herself. "You'll feel better soon."

Striker drifted off, the movement of the train rocking her from side to side like a leaf in an autumn breeze. She found herself back in the chapel, opening the pew seats one by one in an increasing panic, but this time finding each one empty. She wasn't even sure what she was looking for. She could hear noises of approach outside, she was waiting for the sound of gunshots. She had to get out but she had to keep looking. And then that last pew, Pully's pew, and she opened the seat and found...

She woke up with a start, damp with sweat and confusion.

And Morien was gone.

The seat next to her was empty.

She looked round, at the faces of strangers. They seemed twisted, cold. They looked through her as if she didn't exist. The land outside was alien: green and mountainous and completely unrecognisable.

Morien, where are you?

She sat up, looking round her again. Her eyes wide with worry. She wondered whether she should ask someone. The couple opposite were talking to each other in a strange, guttural language that sounded like a musical joke.

Morien, sweetheart, please don't leave me.

She was half out of her seat - her breathing heavy, the carriage begin to spin in dizzying circles - and drawing anxious glances from the people around her, when Morien reappeared, a cool breeze in the sticky evening. "What's wrong?" she asked as she saw the look on Striker's face.

"I woke up and you were gone," Striker said, taking huge gulps of air. She sat back down, drinking in the sight of her friend.

"I'm sorry... I was only gone for a little bit. The toilet was finally free," she said with an apologetic grin. "And I thought I'd phone Asha, and I didn't want to wake you." She fished her mobile phone out of her pocket.

"Is Danny okay?" Striker asked, her eyes dazzling with worry.

Morien smiled. "Danny's fine. He's woken up."

"He has?"

"Asha said he's spoken a few words."

"Yeah?"

"He asked for his portable CD player."

A bubble of laughter erupted from Striker and she felt tears of relief briefly burn her eyes. Suddenly, she shivered. Morien leant over and rubbed her arms. "I'm not cold," Striker said, grateful for the contact.

"I know, you're exhausted. No wonder. You've been through hell the last few days."

Striker looked up into the greenest gaze. Morien was pale too. Morien had dark circles under her eyes. Morien was showing every sign of exhaustion.

"And what about you, honey?" Striker's words were quiet. Morien was stunned by the tone. "You amaze me," Striker said. "You've been through so much, not just over the last few days, but for weeks and months..." She reached up and ran a gentle hand over the corduroy cap. "But you're still here, looking after some overgrown fuck-up kid who can't even stay awake to help you." She shivered again, but felt warm inside, swallowed whole by balmy sea-green in front of her. She gave in to temptation, and caught an errant lock of auburn hair between her fingers, feeling the softness on her skin.

Her eyes fell to Morien's lips, candy-pink and sweetly enticing. She remembered that tiny touch just a few hours before: how they had felt on her skin. And with a rush of comforting heat she realised just how much more she wanted.

She closed her eyes.

And felt the sure touch of Morien's mouth on her own. Her body was suffused in delicious heat that turned her nerves to liquid. The ache in her limbs was replaced by a pulsing want that sank her deeper and deeper. She felt arms go round her, hold her close, rock her, impel life into her. She could feel her blood sparkling. Little flashes of electricity coursing through her veins, singing a single word: *love, love, lovelovelove....*

She wanted to give that word another name. "Morien" she felt on her lips, moving against them. *Morien, my love, my sweet one, my princess....*

"Striker," whispered back with that agonising-beautiful rasp of skin on skin.

Striker groaned into Morien's mouth, an exquisite vibration that thrilled round her body.

"Striker..." Someone was shaking her arm.

"Wha...?"

"Striker, we're almost at Pwllheli. It's time to wake up."

"But...."

The sweet voice said, "Not much longer then we can get you into bed, okay?"

"Bed?" Striker opened her eyes and realised she was drooling onto the headrest. She wiped her mouth with the back of her hand and blinked.

In amongst the flurry of activity around them, was Morien, smiling. "Do you need a tissue?"

Striker could feel herself flushing pink.

They finally alighted from the last train, as sedately as their stiff legs and the heavy suitcase would let them. The day was trying to darken into evening, but June wouldn't let it. The up-late sun still hovered on the horizon, as they tried to adjust to the gloom of the station. Passengers came and went, but for a moment it was enough just to stand.

"What next?" Striker asked, but Morien didn't seem to be listening. They were at one end of the platform and she was staring through the clearing jumble of people as if she'd seen someone she recognised.

Striker followed her gaze.

There was a man standing by the exit. Striker couldn't make out his face, but the evening sunlight fell on his clothes: a casual pair of linen trousers, a loose, striped, short-sleeved shirt and comfortable sandals. He had his hands in his pockets, from the movement of the material he looked like he was jingling loose change. The stance was casual, maybe a little nervous. But as Striker saw him she felt her heart in her throat. She knew that she was going to have to impress this man, and right now she wasn't feeling very impressive.

Too tired to do anything, Striker simply stood, grateful for the solidity of her case against her leg, as if it was propping her up.

But Morien moved, fast, dodging her way through the remains of the passengers. Suddenly, the hand was removed from the trouser pocket and waved, and then the man started forward himself. They met halfway in a devoted collision of arms and bodies, and the man was rocking Morien backwards and forwards in a giant embrace.

Striker rocked backwards on her heels, feeling intrusive. She looked away, at the station around her, trying to get a sense of this place. It looked like any other station... except for the additional signs. *Allanfa*. Exit. *Merched*. Ladies. There was the scent of salt in the air, and just touching the humidity, a breath of sea.

Then Morien broke away, smiling upwards. Her mouth moved, a few words, then she turned and beckoned Striker. So she stirred, harvesting the last vestiges of adrenaline, heaving the suitcase up one more time, and walked into smiling eyes.

"Dad," Morien said, "this is my friend, Striker West. Striker, this is my dad, Sullivan Llewelyn."

He was shorter than Striker, but only just. A trim, wiry body warring with middle-aged spread. His eyes were hazel, hidden behind round, metal-framed glasses. His hair was brown, darker than Morien's, but with a sheen of red in the evening sun, and peppered with grey at the temple. It needed a trim. Striker smiled, and Sullivan's face lit up like his daughter's and he held out a hand.

Striker took it. "Good to meet you, Mr Llewelyn," she said, and relaxed.

Chapter 16: *The Last Homely House in the West*⁵

Sullivan Llewelyn owned a Volvo. It looked as if it had been making the journey between Pwllheli and Lleuadaeth for many years, and knew the way without Sullivan having to do a thing.

Striker and Morien sat in the back, Striker staring absently out of the window at the green and hilly countryside, Morien tossing idle questions and answers to the front seat. Mostly it seemed to be local gossip, nothing too taxing, nothing familiar, and all entirely safe. From time to time a word or a name would catch Striker's attention, but she remained silent. Morien was fielding questions for the both of them, she knew it, and was grateful. Occasionally, a comment was aimed directly at her: pointing out a landmark, a suggestion for a visit, a mention of an activity....

"Oh, Striker, I forgot to ask, do you have a problem with cats?" Morien asked suddenly. The first question that had actually called for Striker to speak.

"Only if they haven't got a problem with me," she said. She glanced up, catching Sullivan's gaze in the mirror. He was watching her. Sizing her up? Striker didn't blame him. What did he know of her? At the very least, a wreck of a woman who'd simply appeared in his daughter's life, bringing trouble in her wake.

"That's a relief. We've got three of them. I wouldn't want you spending your time sneezing," Morien continued blithely. "And they'll love you, just as long as you realise your place in the pecking order, that they'll sleep where they damn well want to, that your food is their food, and that your toes are fair game."

"No problem," Striker replied, "it'll be just like living with Danny." Sullivan's eyes flicked up from the road again, puzzlement wrestling with amusement in his look.

Morien laughed. "Somehow I can't believe you're that low down the pecking order at home."

"True. Danny's toes are fair game too." She finally looked away from the rear view mirror and round at Morien.

Her friend's face was alive. Morien still looked pale and tired, but there was a glow of excitement about her that reminded Striker of a child at Christmas. To be this animated about going home: Striker felt a strand of envy tugging inside, but conversely gloried at the joy. It inspired her, energised her, made her believe that she could at least stay awake until the nearest bed.

The green land rushed by. In the hazy distance Striker could see mountains, holding up the blue and sleepy sky. Sheep dotted the hillsides, as if the clouds had fallen.

And she remembered, this is where she had always pictured Morien. Never in a city, never in the dark and dangerous alleys that had led her to Striker, but here, in a blue and green panorama.

Now it was Striker that didn't fit.

In time, fields transformed to buildings, and then a whole street of stone and brick, followed by another and another, huddled at the foot of the hillside. Looking ahead, they could see the faint trace of water, but the car turned and the water was lost.

And in its place was a row of houses that looked as if they'd been designed by the Brothers Grimm, or their Cymric cousins. White painted, with grey slate roofs, individually they wouldn't have looked out of place in some enchanted forest, the white paint proving to be sugar icing, the slate-tiles... maybe liquorice. Together they looked like a giant's Monopoly board. Four dwarf cottages equalled one king's castle.

Striker smiled. If Sleeping Beauty had been daughter of a woodsman instead of a king, this would have been her home. And now her very own Sleeping Beauty was getting out of the car and approaching the cottage that was surrounded by impenetrable thorns. Except these thorns proved to be a carefully trimmed hedge, and the vines clinging to the cottage walls were nothing more than neatly-cultivated clematis, about ready to burst its buds. All the cottages had beautiful gardens, ablaze with summer colour.

She briefly wondered why she recognised the scene... and then it came to her. The photograph. Morien and Sophie, in happier times, posing and laughing.... She felt a little twist of jealousy that was quickly consumed by her overwhelming tiredness.

Striker pushed herself out of the car, as Sullivan hauled her suitcase out of the boot. "Mr Llewelyn, let me get that."

"No, it's fine," Sullivan replied, though he seemed extremely grateful to set the case down. "Though I would be interested in finding out why you're carrying a set of weights round with you." His eyes teased. "And please call me Sullivan, Striker."

"They're not weights, daddy," Morien called from the gate. "Striker's got a library with her."

The look of respect that graced the man's face told Striker that Morien had just won her some well-earned points of parental approval, and he seemed to lift the suitcase with an added reverence.

"Let's get you inside then," he said. "You look as if you're about to drop."

* * * * *

Morien had to admire her. Striker had managed to give the perfect impression of politeness as she was ushered into the sitting room and offered food and drink and the most comfortable armchair by her father.

Morien watched Striker struggle to keep her eyes open as she declined a cup of coffee, even a glass of wine, in favour of a glass of water. And she watched in amusement as a tabby cat appeared from nowhere, landing heavily on Striker's lap and kneaded her knees with sharpened claws before settling herself down.

It had woken Striker up a little, but she now looked positively panicked. "What do I do now?"

"Chuck her off or stroke her."

Gingerly, Striker stroked the soft fur and received a rumble of appreciation in response. So she did it again.

"Her name's Easey."

"Easey?"

"One stroke and she's anybody's." Morien's eyes twinkled.

"And I thought I was a pussy magnet," Striker retorted, stifling another yawn.

Morien smirked. "That's a cheap joke."

"Yeah, well I'm not feeling too expensive right now." One more stifled yawn.

She looked at the cat, so peaceful on her lap. *Anybody's, huh? You and I, cat, we understand each other.* She ran her hand along the dappled fur again, and again felt the answering vibration.

The warmth of the cat and her purring, finally sent Striker over the sweet edge. She closed her eyes.

Morien watched from the sofa. Her friend's face was pale, and if she looked closely she imagined she could still see a ghost of a handprint on her cheek.

She moved, crouching down by Striker so she could stroke Easey. And she touched Striker's hand. "How would you like that glass of water in bed?"

Striker jerked her eyes open and Morien momentarily wallowed in the gratitude that she saw there.

The suitcase was already in her bedroom. Drake's bedroom, they called it, but there was little of the boy there now. It was simply a pleasant guest bedroom, although Striker could only seem to notice the bed, duvet-covered with welcoming soft pillows. It wasn't as large as her own of course, but still sizeable, and infinitely tempting, although right now she could have slept on a bed of nails.

Morien encouraged her into the bathroom, where Striker, her hair gathered on top of her head, did her best to wash away the grime of the last... how long now? The last day and a half clung to her skin in layers, and she soaped off the travel, the police station, (was that a tomato seed under her nail?), the hospital, Tumblety Street....

She regarded her body as she rinsed soap from her now clean skin. She couldn't wash off the scratches and bruises she'd gained - her skin a sensitive work of art in places - and she knew she could never fully wash off the stain the chapel, so she shut off the shower, wrapped the large, borrowed towel round herself, gathered her clothes, and tiptoed back to the bedroom.

She opened the door and found herself wrapping the towel around her more tightly, as she realised Morien was in there.

"I thought you might want the window open in here," she said, her back to Striker. "It took me ages to find the key, and there's a particular knack to opening..." she turned and saw Striker was all but naked. Her cheeks glowed in the dim light of the bedside lamp. "Um... sorry... I'll give you some privacy." She headed for the door.

"Morien, wait."

Morien turned, expectantly.

Striker wondered what to say. "I... I... would like the window open. Could you...?"

"Of course," Morien smiled and returned to the window. "I think it's going to be a warm night." She put the key in the window lock.

Striker smiled at her words - *one night, baby, but not when I'm running on empty* - but didn't respond, merely dropping her dirty clothes in the corner and turning to her suitcase, a single hand clutching at the top of her towel.

She dug a t-shirt out from the mess of her hurriedly-packed clothes and books, and glanced at Morien. So, she could wait for Morien to leave or she could...

...shit, they were friends, weren't they?

With her back to her friend, who seemed to be fully occupied in wrestling with the window, she dropped the towel and unpinned her hair.

And Morien stopped breathing.

The magic of twilight. The window had turned half-mirror. She could see her own face, flushed pink, in the glass, the darkening garden shouldering the blue dusk outside, and seemingly beyond, a phantasm. Pale against dark, Striker's skin seemed to glow, translucent against the lazy, silhouetted trees. Hazy curves - the arc of a muscle, the swell of a breast - converging with the evening as if smoothed by a lover's touch. Then her hair cascaded like water across her shoulders and down her back, both hiding and accentuating the landscape of her body.

And then a long t-shirt came down like a shutter and Morien was left with her own swift breathing and the impending night. She heaved the window open and gulped the air as if it was liquid in a desert.

No one, her dazed mind thought, no one deserves to look that good on a diet of coffee, burgers and bacon sandwiches.

She felt her heart slow with the sound of Lleuadaeth at night: the distant sound of cars, the final whisper of birdsong and beyond it all, the faint hush of the sea. And, drawing the curtains, she felt brave enough to turn.

Striker was slipping into bed, covers now drawn up over the body that had tantalised her from the shadows. She put her head down on the pillows and made a sound halfway between moan and sigh that went straight to Morien's centre. But Striker's eyes were closed and her breathing even.

Morien was caught halfway between relief and disappointment, but took this as her cue to leave. Treading softly, she moved the bedside. "Goodnight, Striker, love," she said, as quietly as she could, and switching off the bedside lamp, turned towards the door.

"Morien," she heard as soft as starshine through the nightfall of the room, her hand caught in a soft grip.

"Yes?" She looked back and saw Striker's eyes neon blue in the dark.

"Morien." Striker spoke her name so sweetly she thought her heart would melt. "Before you go, I wanted to say..." There was a pause. Morien felt the tension in Striker's hand. She seemed to be struggling for the words, as if looking for them through a maze of sleep. "...I wanted to say thank you." Another pause, but Morien's hand was still prisoner, waiting for more.

"Striker, I haven't..."

"Morien, what you've done for me... I couldn't begin to tell you how much..." Still the hand grasped hers. There was a sigh, a long breath in the dark. "Morien, your... friendship has meant more to me than... than anything."

And Striker's hand slipped from her own.

Morien closed the door behind her, just for a moment resting against the soft wood as if unwilling to leave. She wanted to go back in. She wanted to go to Striker on her knees and worship her for what she had just said. She wanted to curl up in Striker's embrace, and sleep. It had only been a few nights ago when....

But Striker needed sleep, desperately, and so did she and she would be terrified in disturbing her... in so many ways.

She had the quickest and most welcome of showers, changed into a pair of pyjamas, and made her way back downstairs to say goodnight to her father.

He was in the kitchen, standing at the counter, a big, black tomcat winding gently round his legs. "Heriell, you know hot chocolate is not good for your teeth," he was saying to the determined feline, and Morien wondered, not for the first time, if he didn't get lonely here on his own.

She crept up behind him and reached up to give him a peck on the cheek.

Sullivan glanced round at her and smiled. "You look as if you're ready for bed, too."

"Yeah, sorry, dad. It's been a long day. A long few days. But if there's enough of that for a second mug, I wouldn't say no."

"Big surprise there," Sullivan said, raising an eyebrow, and revealed the ready-prepared second mug, complete with bobbing pink and white marshmallows.

"You know you're the best dad in the world, don't you?" Morien said, stealing the mug away and scampering to the kitchen table.

"I always suspected as much," Sullivan replied, following her.

There was a contented silence as the chocolate cooled.

"Are you going to fill me in on the details, then?" Sullivan finally broached.

"Details?"

"Of what's been going on. This bit of trouble you're in. Just how serious is it. I mean, if you wanted Idomeneo involved?"

"Dad...", Morien sighed, "do you mind if we talk about it tomorrow? If I start thinking about it now, I'll never shut down." She stuck a finger in her hot chocolate and held it out to the plump, black Heriell, who had followed them to the table and now sat patiently waiting for a night-cap.

Her father sighed and licked melted marshmallow off his top lip as he watched his daughter. The cat's pink tongue lapped at Morien's finger. She smiled at the feeling.

"Well," he said, "it can't be that bad. For someone in trouble you seem remarkably contented, which is lovely to see."

"I've got my two favourite people in the whole world under the same roof. Why wouldn't I be happy?"

The silence made her look up at her father and then she realised what she had said. Sullivan didn't look shocked or judgmental. His raised eyebrows simply asked a question. He swirled the remains of his chocolate in the mug and regarded the liquid with seeming fascination, while his mouth tried to form words. He finally started with: "May I ask you something, cariad?"

"Yes..." she replied, tentatively.

"How... how long have you known Striker?"

Morien thought for a moment. Since February... technically. Well, that's how long Striker had known Morien. But she had known Striker... It felt like a lifetime. It felt like centuries. It felt like she'd known Striker, soul-deep, for a thousand reincarnations.

She stared bleakly at her chocolate. It was showing signs of developing a skin. "A week," she said. And almost half of that week was spent believing that Striker was harassing her.

The concern softened on Sullivan's face. "I'm not going to ask anything stupid like 'How do you know you can trust her?' I trust you, Mo, and I trust your judgement. And anyone who carries that many books around with her can't be bad."

Morien smiled, despite herself. Then apprehension stole into her eyes. "But...?"

"But... the first time I hear about her is the same time I hear you're in trouble, and I can't help but wonder. I love you, I'm your father, it's my job to worry and you've been through so much this year. I don't want to see you hurt again."

"I am an adult, dad."

"I know that, sweetheart. I suppose I'm just concerned that it's been a difficult time for you, and with Sophie away...."

"I've latched onto the first person I can find?" Morien's tone was clipped. "You don't know her, dad."

"Do you?" It was couched in the softest, sweetest, most loving manner, but Morien felt as if the question had drawn blood.

She looked her father in his hazel eyes. "No, I don't. Until a few hours ago, I didn't even know what she did for a living. I don't even know her real name. How foolish is that?"

"Sweetheart...."

"But I trust her, dad. I *trust* her. And it's frightening because there's a big part of me that can't explain why and I can't control these feelings I have for her. I feel so guilty, because Sophie's my girlfriend, but it's like I forget her the moment Striker walks into the room." She took a breath, trying to calm her heartbeat. "And I don't know what to do, dad, because I'm so scared of what I'm feeling. I'm scared of losing Sophie, but I'm even more terrified of losing Striker. I feel like I'm on a cliff edge," she finished, lamely.

Again the silence. Morien ran her fingers through her hair, her hand settling unconsciously on the scar at the back of her scalp.

"So, what *do* you know about her, sweetheart?"

Morien's voice was quiet, but the words came fast and easily. "I know that at the lowest point in my life, when you weren't there, when Drake wasn't there, when I was lying in a hospital bed in a coma, and wasn't even there for myself, *she* was there. Daddy, she read to me. It wasn't her job, she didn't have to do it. I was a complete stranger, but out of the goodness of her heart, she reached out to me. And when someone has that much goodness in their heart, does anything else matter?"

It was an honest question, and looking at his daughter's earnest emerald gaze, he answered only as a parent could. "Your happiness matters....," Morien was about to speak, but he raised his hand to silence her, "...and if Striker truly makes you happy then I will love her for it."

Gratitude welled up like tears in Morien's eyes. "Thank you."

Sullivan smiled back, simply glad to have his daughter there. "Now," he said eventually, "finish your chocolate, and get yourself up to bed. And don't forget to brush your teeth."

"How old am I, dad?"

"Twenty seven going on five," Sullivan retorted, chuckling, and went to do the washing up.

* * * * *

Upstairs, Striker slept the sleep of the dead.

And didn't dream.

Chapter 17: A heart well worth winning⁶

It was a soft, warm light that woke her. And she basked in it.

She was an angel bathed in celestial glow.

She was a lioness on the African plain, stretched out in warm shade.

At the very least, she was a lizard sunning itself on a rock.

That made a change, she usually felt like a lizard lurking under a rock.

But then she returned to the celestial light, because gently, quietly, she could hear music. So unlike the pulsating beat of Danny's music, which could wake her up like an aural cattle prod. This came to her, undulating - washing over her in rolling, string-tipped sound. A sound like angel wings.

Slowly, she opened her eyes.

The room was still dim, but sunlight was bursting through every tiny uncovered gap at the window. A breeze, not much more than a stirring of air, played with the curtains, causing the sunbeams to dance in harmony.

Striker felt rested.

She felt relaxed.

She felt as if she had slept for the first time in several years.

She jumped as she felt something move on the bed. Looking down, she saw Easey stretching luxuriously against her thigh. Striker decided to emulate her and stretched too, from her finger joints down to the tips of her toes.

The door was ajar, by just an inch. Below the music, she could hear the faint sounds of life downstairs. She wondered what time it was. She wondered where she'd dropped her watch in the rush to get into bed last night. She wondered if Morien was awake. She wondered what they ate for breakfast in Wales.

Feeling more energised than she had done in months, she jumped out of bed and threw back the curtains, plunging the room into glorious light. Outside, the birds were singing their heads off.

Striker debated whether to join them then and there, but opted for the muted studio of the shower instead.

By the time she headed downstairs, braided, washed, dressed and ready for life, the music had stopped; replaced by the drone of the television. She stopped in the doorway of the sitting room. Sullivan and Morien were silent, engrossed by the news.

"The Metropolitan police have seized cocaine with an estimated street value of £300 million in one of the biggest drugs seizures on record. The drugs were discovered at an abandoned chapel in east London. Also found was the body of a man, who is yet to be formally identified...."

The bubble of joy burst. Striker opened her mouth. "His name was Paul Maloney, twenty nine years old, of no fixed abode and the Boom Shack, south London," Striker said, quietly.

"Striker?!" Morien looked round, shocked.

"I saw him." Striker smiled weakly. Morien got up to meet her, the report still ringing in her ears.

"Twelve men who were caught attempting to remove the haul have been arrested for drugs and firearms offences. Further arrests are expected to follow."

A police spokesman appeared on screen, talking about drug gangs and murder.

"You saw the body at Tumblety Street?"

Striker nodded. "Doesn't matter now. Police have found him, and looks like they've got the bastards. Lil' Pully can rest in peace."

"Police are also investigating the possible involvement of members of staff from the East Metropolitan Borough Council. Council members are yet to comment on the operation, but a statement is expected...."

Still halfway through the report, Sullivan switched the television off. "Well, I think the two of you have been remarkably brave. I'm proud of you. Both of you." He smiled at Striker. He was feeling better... and worse... after the talk he had had with his daughter that morning. Now he knew the nature of the trouble. Now he knew just how much danger they had been in. "Striker, I thought that you and Morien might like a pub lunch today. My treat. What do you say?"

"That would be lovely, Mr Llewelyn, thank you."

"And please call me Sullivan. If you keep calling me Mr Llewelyn, I'll have to start giving you homework. Now, we ought to go in a minute if we're going to get a table. Are you two ready?"

"Do you want to go on ahead, dad? We'll be right behind you."

Sullivan looked from Morien to Striker and smiled. "I'll get the drinks in." They heard the front

door close behind him.

"Don't you have breakfast in Wales?" Striker asked.

Morien's eyes twinkled with amusement. "Striker, it's past midday. You were asleep for over fourteen hours."

Striker's mouth opened and closed. "Oh."

"I stuck my head round your door a couple of hours ago and you were dead to the world." Morien didn't mention that she'd stood there for a good few minutes, watching Striker sleep; loving the sweet serenity that smoothed her face. She hadn't even noticed when Easey slid past her legs only realising the little tabby was there when she'd leapt onto the bed. Striker hadn't even stirred at that little disturbance, and deciding it would be more disrupting to try and move Easey, Morien had left her there, leaving the door ajar and wishing it was her settling herself down against Striker's long body.

"So that's how I got a bedmate," Striker said.

Morien smiled, and blushed slightly, as if her thoughts had been caught naked, unashamed and with a box of tissues. "I phoned Asha again, earlier," she said.

"How's Danny?"

Morien felt again that little tickle of jealousy at the way Striker's face lit up, at her eagerness to hear about her friend.

"Sleeping most of the time, but holding his own."

Striker giggled: an amazing sound from this normally dry American, welled up from relief. "Makes a change, Danny usually gets someone else to hold...." She looked at Morien and buttoned her lip, and then the sparkle diminished. "I feel bad for not being there with him."

"And where would you be if you were still down there?" Morien's voice sounded sharp, despite herself. "You wouldn't be safe. They might still be after you, after us. Would Danny want that?"

Striker answered with a question. "Do you think they've caught them?"

Morien shrugged. "It said they've arrested twelve people. Hopefully, Bruce and Nigel are among them. But, just in case they aren't, I'm glad you're up here... with me."

Striker smiled, softly. "So am I." She reached a hand out, thinking to cup Morien's cheek, but lost the burst of courage and simply brushed an auburn strand away from her skin. "I don't know what I'd do without you."

"You wouldn't have been charged with drug dealing. You'd have your best friend safe at home

instead of in intensive care. You'd still have a job...."

"And I would be miserable."

Striker's eyes fell to Morien's lips as the Welsh woman smiled shyly. They were neat and faintly heart shaped, and full and soft and Striker suddenly got the most stubborn urge to touch them... kiss them... lick them. Anything rather than just stand here like a jerk looking at them. She remembered the dream she had had on the train the day before, and felt an answering tickle of memory between her thighs.

There was a silence, heavy laden with the humidity of anticipation, and it was Morien who broke it, a voice like cool valley rain. "We ought to go," she said. Her tongue came out, just to dampen that plump bottom lip, and Striker wondered if her knees would give way. Instead, she forced her mind back to the trivial.

"Do I look respectable enough?" she asked. "I mean, you look...." Morien was wearing a plain cotton dress, rich green and sleeveless, which, while managing to hide all those curves that Striker was craving, somehow accentuated them by their concealment.

Morien's eyes moved slowly down Striker's body, taking in the loose t-shirt that allowed a glimpse of the strong contours of her upper arms, the peaked swell of full breasts, the knee-length shorts, the silky accentuation of her calf muscles, the truly ancient sneakers, those calf muscles... and her eyes wandered up again. "You look fine," she said.

* * * * *

The sky was a deep, cloudless blue, the sun almost blinding off the sea and the whitewashed buildings, with the slightest touch of breeze from the water ahead. They made their slow way down the incline of Lleudraeth's main street towards the little harbour. Morien pointed out shops, some open, some closed in deference to Sunday. Striker trailed smoke.

Morien had given her a look of disgust as she'd pulled the cigarettes out of her pocket.

"I haven't had one for almost a day!"

"Your lungs must be throwing a party."

"So I'll bring refreshment," Striker growled and snapped her cigarette lighter, although she was careful, as always, not to get the glowing stick anywhere near Morien.

Halfway down the hill, Morien asked a question. "Striker, why didn't you tell me about Paully at the chapel?"

"Because he wasn't pretty." She took a drag from the cigarette to still the slight queasiness that

suddenly materialised.

"But you could have told me."

"I wanted to forget...." Striker stopped for a moment, mid-pavement. "Pully's my friend. I don't want to remember him like that. I want to remember him for what he was." She half-smiled. "Fun-loving... easy-going... a stoned, oversexed, little buttmunch... but he was my friend. I don't want to remember him as... what was in that chapel. You get it?"

Morien nodded.

"And there was no way then, and there is no way now, I'm going to share what I saw with you, 'kay?" Her voice was determined, strong and kindly. It made Morien smile with understanding and warmth, and filled her with sadness at her friend's grief. And she still wanted to know.

"Tell me about Pully," she asked. "I mean, what he was like."

Striker looked her in the eyes - they seemed to be shimmering with tears that she herself couldn't shed - and gave her a sad smile. Then with the cigarette dangling from her lips, she started talking about Lil' Pully: the first time she met him, his friendship with Thomas, the time he tackled a guy double his size because he'd swiped his spliff....

They continued their walk down the hill at the bottom of which was a pedestrianised square, open to the harbour. On one side, large and cheerful, was a pub. There were bright, flower-laden boxes at the windows, and tables with happy drinkers spilled out onto the square. 'The Ship Inn', a sign declared in proud letters.

Striker started towards it, still talking, but felt a hand on her arm. "You don't want to go in there." Striker turned to look at her. "At least, I don't want to go in there."

Morien tugged on her arm, and the two of them crossed to the opposite side of the square, where a much smaller pub seemed to be hiding in a corner. A sign hung motionless over the door. 'The Half Moon', it murmured.

An elderly couple were leaving as they approached its front porch. Striker held the outer door open for them, a gesture rewarded by a smiling, "Diolch." Behind her, she could the couple greeting her friend politely. "P'nawn da, Morien, sut dach chi?"

"Da iawn, diolch, Mrs Lloyd. S'dach chi?"

The door slipped from her fingers, cutting off the conversation. Now, from inside the pub, she could hear a rumble of voices: jokes, laughs, 'hellos', 'goodbyes', questions on health, wealth and wellbeing. A man, obviously sitting close to the other side of the door, called out, "So, where's your Dylan today?"

"Oh," a distant voice said, "he's...."

Striker opened the inner door.

And every single person in the room turned to look at her.

She wondered, momentarily, if she'd grown an extra head.

The same, distant voice piped up again, continuing the sentence: "...mae o adra. Mae o'n sâl."

And the rumble started again, as each conversation was taken up... but in a foreign language.
Fucking rude bastards!

"Don't take it personally," a soft voice said in her ear. "They do it to everybody they don't recognise. It's a defence mechanism against the invading English."

And as if to prove a point someone close by said, "Hello, Morien, love, how's it going?" Morien couldn't help chuckling as she replied.

Striker heard someone call her name and she turned to see a welcoming pint glass, and beneath it, a smiling Sullivan.

He was sitting with someone. The man seemed a mass of unyielding granite. He was broad in every direction, and gave the impression of weighty, immovable, grey solidity. He seemed timeless. Striker couldn't guess his age - somewhere between thirty five and sixty five. Maybe. She felt his eyes on her as she approached the table.

At one hand was an almost-empty glass of beer. Under the other was a dog-eared copy of *Our Mutual Friend*.

Sullivan pushed a chair out for Striker, as Morien greeted the mountain man affectionately. "I thought you might like to try the local brew," he said, pushing the pint glass towards her. She smiled her thanks and, tipping the glass in a communal toast, took a sip, praying to any passing deity that her enjoyment looked convincing. What was the appropriate etiquette for telling the father of the love of your life that you thought bitter tasted like creosote?

Then she took another sip, just to make sure it was as revolting as she thought.

For creosote, it sure went down smooth.

Sullivan was speaking again. "Striker, this is a good friend of mine, Idomeneo Jones. Idomeneo, this is Striker West."

Striker smiled and nodded: "Good to meet you."

Slowly, like watching a glacial shift, the man's faced moved. "So," he said in a rumbling bass voice, "you're the drug dealer."

Striker's jaw dropped. She looked in horror from Sullivan to Idomeneo and back again. Idomeneo stared back. Sullivan looked suitably uncomfortable. "Sorry, Striker, I should explain...."

"Idomeneo is Detective Inspector Jones of the North Wales Police," Morien finished, a wry smile playing on her face.

A flash of understanding crossed Striker's face, but she still confronted the policeman. "I'm no drug dealer."

There was a pause. Idomeneo took a leisurely mouthful of beer, while he regarded her. "No, you aren't," he said, finally.

Nothing more seemed forthcoming.

"I know I'm not, but how can you be so sure?" Striker asked.

Again. The pause. Striker was beginning to realise that holding a conversation with Idomeneo Jones was a Sisyphean task.

"Were you wearing gloves that night?" he asked, suddenly.

Okay, a question from leftfield. She could hit back. "Hell no, it was a warm night."

He nodded over his beer.

"Did you have gloves in your pockets?"

"No."

It was as if they could hear the chugging of a great, ancient machine inside him.

"Did you have a handkerchief or tissues?"

"No." Striker felt as if she was back in the interview room at Clarke Street police station. She took another sip of bitter and found its disgusting taste surprisingly refreshing.

Idomeneo sat back in his chair. It creaked beneath him. "Very clever of you."

"What?"

"Dealing drugs without touching them."

His audience inched forward with hopeful expectation, as if he was a magician waving a wand over a top hat.

"What do you mean, Idomeneo?" Morien asked.

He looked Striker in the eye. "Your fingerprints were found on the cigarette packet, but not on the bag the drugs were in. Either you disposed of some gloves before you were arrested, or you never touched the drugs in the first place."

And the metaphorical white rabbit appeared from the hat, and sat on the table, nibbling a carrot.

"But that proves her story. That clears her!" Morien said. "That's fantastic!"

"No it doesn't," Idomeneo replied. "Any decent prosecution lawyer could wiggle out of that one. But it might raise enough questions." He drained his glass.

"How do you know all this?" Striker asked.

"Your paperwork landed on my desk yesterday afternoon. And I'd left *Our Mutual Friend* at home. Made interesting reading." In the depths of Idomeneo's coal-dark eyes, Striker saw a twinkle like diamonds, and she was suddenly incredibly grateful he was on the case.

Hell, she thought, if you're gonna damage a couple of human humvees you might as well use a walking rock face.

"Have they caught them?" Striker asked.

Idomeneo's dark grey eyebrows came together like mountain peaks. "Who?"

Striker glanced at Morien. "Bruce and Nigel."

The policeman frowned in thought, faultlines appearing on his brow. "Bruce and Nigel? No surname?"

"We're not sure." Striker took a guess. "Maybe Lamprey?"

"I don't know of any Lampreys who have been arrested."

Idomeneo got up.

"Give my love to Mary and the kids," Sullivan said.

Idomeneo nodded.

"Thank you for your help," Morien said.

Idomeneo nodded again, gathered up the empty glass and *Our Mutual Friend* and turned to Striker, "See you tomorrow."

And then he was gone.

"What was that about?" Sullivan asked.

"I'm on bail. I have to register with the local police." She looked at Morien. "You'll come with me, won't you?"

Her face was mixture of childlike yearning and nonchalant disorientation, and it was a look that Morien couldn't resist. "Of course I will," she said, momentarily laying a finger on the back of Striker's hand. But her father's presence, and the tingle of skin on skin, made her remove it. "Maybe we can make a day of it. We could have a look round Caernarfon, see the castle...."

Striker smiled. "I'd love to."

She really, *really* would love to. A day with Morien that was free from drug dealers, burglaries, shootings, dead bodies.... Just the two of them. She looked at Morien. The headscarf she was wearing, tie-dyed green with streaks of blue and purple, made her eyes as deep as a forest. She wanted to lose herself in their secret paths.

They would be alone, wouldn't they?

She turned to Sullivan, her mind phrasing and re-phrasing.... "Will you be able to join us, Mr Llewelyn?"

Sullivan smiled, his gentle, Welsh tenor mock sad. "Unfortunately, my plight tomorrow is to light the spark of Shakespearean wonder in the minds of bored teenagers. Think of me while you're having fun, won't you? And *please* call me Sullivan. Now, what do you two want to eat?"

Chapter 18: *From far, from eve and morning*⁷

They came blinking out into the daylight, the sun almost blinding and the air heavy with Sunday afternoon lethargy. Across the square was The Ship Inn, pretty and dominant. Drinkers still relaxed at the tables in front of the building.

But Striker had soon realised why the Llewelyns frequented The Half Moon. Its initially dark interior had blossomed into something far less threatening. The gentle buzz of conversation, lyrical Welsh counterpointed by middle-C English, provided a harmony to their own conversation.

It was cool inside. Large ceiling fans circulated air, sweeping away the muggy smells of cigarette smoke and stale beer through the open windows, where outside the harbour square sizzled.

Striker had mellowed into a follow-up half pint of the revolting bitter. It was a taste she was quickly acquiring. Even Morien had welcomed a small glass of shandy.

The food was excellent. A Sunday pub lunch: Welsh roast lamb with a cornucopia of trimmings followed by home-made peach ice cream. A good meal, great company, and a cup of coffee attended by a gentle cigarette. Very different from a beer at the Boom. Striker had felt she could get used to this.

As closing time approached, bilingual goodbyes had echoed from the doorway. On several occasions, Morien and Sullivan would add to the chorus, and Striker had found herself joining in. Until their own turn to step back out into the afternoon.

They watched Sullivan make his way across the square and back up the hill, a pile of exercise books and a red pen awaiting him.

Morien and Striker dawdled in the square, drawn towards the harbour wall and the little boats bobbing on the nursery waves. Seagulls wheeled above them. Striker glanced back at the emptying Ship Inn. "So, why don't I want to go in there?"

"Looks pleasant enough, doesn't it?" Morien seemed to pause with thought before she continued, her eyes fixed firmly away from the building and out into the harbour. Her voice seemed low and dark in the bright light. "I suppose you could say that my *type* isn't welcome in there."

Striker looked from the building back to Morien. "But they can't do that!"

"No, they can't. But there are subtle ways and means of making me or my family... or my friends... feel very unwelcome should we step through the door. That building is the pretty face of small-town bigotry."

"Fucking bastards. I wouldn't let them get away with it. I would...."

"I know you would, Striker. But I'm smaller than you and not as strong as you...." Morien sighed. "Sometimes, it's safer to go for the easy life. Keep your head down, go to a different pub...."

"...let the drug dealers get away with it? Morien, I know that's not you."

"Maybe you don't know me as well as you think, stalker."

There was an awkward pause. The heat seemed heavier.

"What do they do?"

"Nothing much. Name-calling. Spitting. I've been threatened before, but it's never got beyond words. My dad's a friend of Idomeneo Jones, remember, so they can't get too obvious. Besides The Half Moon serves better food and the people in there are better company. So, what's the

problem?"

"Is it a problem that there's a bunch of guys coming over from The Ship who look like rejects from the Hood?"

"What?" Morien finally turned round. There were five of them, barely out of their teens - some of them hardly seemed out of short trousers. But even in the hottest of weather they wore caps, hoodies, big baggy clothes.

She mumbled something under her breath that sounded Welsh and vulgar to Striker.

Striker, for her part, simply leant back against the harbour wall. Leisurely, she extracted a cigarette and, nonchalantly, she lit it. Just a few days ago she had stared down the barrel of a gun. She wasn't about to be alarmed by some punk kids who looked and walked like wannabe rapper trolls on E.

In fact, she couldn't help but be amused.

But Morien was on edge, and Striker briefly remembered the youths in the packed carriage of the Underground train, from whom Morien had shrunk all that time ago....

"Hey, dyke, what are you doing here?" the first called as they approached. He seemed to be the oldest of them, the leader. He must have been just escaping his teens, small and wiry, and the kind of complexion that displayed a pubertal battle with acne which he had well and truly lost.

Morien sighed. "That's none of your business, Dean."

"It's my fucking business when perverts like you invade my town."

The others chimed in. "Yeah, fuck off."

"Go back to England, dyke."

"Ffwcia oma."⁸

"This is my town too. If you can't accept that, then maybe *you* should leave."

"Yeah, right." There were laughs round the group. "We live here, you don't."

Morien moved. "Come on, Striker, let's go," she said quietly.

Striker didn't move. She took another drag from the cigarette and watched the group through half-lidded eyes. They had ignored her until then.

"Maybe your girlfriend wants a taste of something different," Dean grinned. Sweat was dripping down from under his cap. A rivulet ran down through the pockmarks. "You want to see that,

teacher-girl? Want to see me give your girlfriend one?"

Morien rounded on him, her voice as angry as Striker had ever heard her. "Cau dy ffwcyn ceg, ti cachu mes."

Striker had absolutely no idea what Morien had just said, but judging by her friend's tone, the surprise on the pock-marked face of the young man and the laughs it received from his friends, it was something very rude indeed. She grinned.

Great curveball, teacher-girl.

"So, little teacher-girl's learnt some grown-up words, has she?" Dean replied.

"At least little teacher-girl has grown up," Morien spat back.

There was a chorus of "Ooooh" from the amused boys.

"You want to see grown up?" Dean said, fingering his fly.

"I've seen it, thanks, I didn't fancy it."

"I can see what you fancy."

Dean's shaded eyes dallied up Striker's body. She smiled, taking a final drag from her cigarette and flicking the stub over the harbour wall.

"See anything you like, boy?"

Grown up had arrived.

Her voice was so sultry the summer heat went up a few degrees. She licked her lips. Morien could feel her cheeks burning as her eyes followed Dean's.

"I see a lot I like."

"Good." Striker smiled, encouragingly. "Come here."

Dean didn't have to be asked twice. He moseyed over, stopping barely inches away from her, invading her body space.

That's right, little boy, come to mamma.

He was considerably shorter than Striker, his eyes rested easily on her breasts, which suddenly seemed to blossom under the t-shirt. Distended tips thrust through the material. Dean licked his lips...

...and found himself sprawled on his back, Striker's trainer balanced on his groin.

"Like picking on girls, do you, you little shit?" she said. "Figures. Little boy like you can't pick up girls so you have to pick on them, is that right?" Her foot pushed downwards, just enough to put pressure where it mattered. She bent down a little, smiling at him. "Or is it because you're jealous, boy, because this is the closest thing you're dick is getting to any kind of action."

And she stamped on his groin. Even Morien winced as Dean cried out.

But Striker was moving off him, moving away. "Do you honestly think someone like me is going to be interested in a skinny little pizza faced runt like you?" She paused. "Especially when I can have a sweet thing like her." She gifted Morien with a smile.

Morien felt her cheeks go even pinker. Any more and she felt her freckles would explode from her skin. Long, sensuous fingers ran across the bare flesh of her upper back, and an arm was draped around her shoulders.

Striker glanced back at the gaping and watery-eyed Dean, his friends agog behind him. "Now be a good boy and go play with your little friends." She smiled again. "I know you want to. Isn't *playing* with your friends what you really dream about at night?" She winked at him and, her arm still round Morien, they walked back up the square, towards the High Street.

Morien looked back. Dean was trying to get up, but he seemed to be caught up in his own voluminous trousers. His face was red with heat and anger. "You'll get yours, slebog⁹. I know you will," he shouted. Morien slid her arm round Striker's waist, needing reassurance. Needing to feel the wonderful freedom of her arm round Striker's waist.

"You'll be all right, honey," Striker whispered in her ear, aware that they were still being watched. "They're not going to touch you. *I* won't let them." She pulled back and looked at Morien's pink face. "Hey. Looks like you've caught the sun."

"Striker, you don't have to protect me, you know." The words came suddenly, as if from nowhere.

Striker stilled for a moment. Removing her arm from her shoulder and shifting away from Morien, she looked down at her. She frowned and her voice was tense with suppressed annoyance. "I'm sorry, I thought I could help."

Morien sighed. *Damn it. Damn Dean Powell and his stupid friends. We were having such a lovely day.* "You could have seriously hurt him, Striker."

"Asshole deserves it," Striker mumbled. "Anyway, it could have been worse. Could have been wearing my boots...."

"Striker..." Morien picked her words. "Not everything calls for physical payback."

"But I couldn't walk away from that."

"You didn't have to hurt him."

"Morien, dickwads like that don't understand anything except fighting."

"But doesn't that bring us down to their level? Doesn't it make us as bad as them?"

Striker flinched from the comment.

"No, I'm sorry. I didn't mean that. You could never be... Your intentions were honourable, when they wouldn't know the meaning of the word."

A slight smile appeared.

"I appreciate what you were trying to do back there. I appreciate everything you've done to help me this last week. I suppose... I suppose I've got tired of people always fussing around me. People always worrying about me. I used to be able to look after myself and now... all I seem to be is a burden...."

"You're not a burden!" Striker exclaimed. "How could you ever think you're a burden?"

"I've had to ask a lot of people for help and understanding these past few months...."

"...and I charge in, in my big black boots, when you don't even ask for it?"

"You're wearing trainers."

"Okay, I charge in, in my crappy trainers...."

"No, my love, you charge in riding a white stallion. That's the difference between you and... everybody else. You really do protect me. You're my knight in shining armour."

The look on Striker's face was one that Morien wanted to inspire again. Time and time again. Every day for the rest of their lives. It was like sunrise over the hills: the faintest confusion of light, followed by the slow explosion of dazzling joy. Her eyes shone with blue radiance. Her smile was pure brilliance. Morien's heart bloomed with love.

Striker wasn't sure what had thrilled her more, Morien's description or the use of "my love". Had she been ten she might have found herself cartwheeling round the square. Instead, she played it cool.

"Knight, huh?" she said. "Better go buy some smarter sneakers then."

Morien grinned. "You don't have to do that. I love you the way you are, Striker West. Don't you change a thing."

And Striker stopped breathing.

The sun stopped burning, the sea splashed to a halt, the seagulls' cries were drowned in beautiful silence: nothing was left but Morien's shining green eyes, her smooth, pink mouth, the distance between them....

So Striker did something she'd been wanting to do for... her entire life. She bent down and kissed Morien.

Her lips were soft beneath Striker's. And warm. She melted at the heat of it, and the gentle, determined strength of Morien's response. It was a kiss that made promises: fidelity, adoration, breath-taking fantasies of flesh and sinew and bodies moving together in the most divine of harmonies.

It lasted a second, maybe less. A quick, non-threatening peck. Sweet, chaste and pure before the world started turning again.

And from the harbour end of the square there were shouts of "Fucking perverts".

So she was a pervert. *Fine.*

If something this good was perverted then the world was screwed.

"Fuck 'em," Striker said.

"I'd rather not," Morien replied. She slipped her arm back round Striker's waist, and welcomed Striker's loose embrace across her shoulders. And they wandered back up the High Street.

* * * * *

They walked their lunch off.

Morien gave Striker a guided tour of Lleudraeth: a journey through her life. They passed the squat primary school she'd attended, with its cream-coloured walls, friendly in the summer sun. Peeping in at the windows, they glimpsed the proud work of the youngest members of the community - bright coloured and enthusiastic on the pinboards. Striker had the greatest urge to push Morien on one of the lonely-looking swings in the playground, but decided that lunch hadn't settled enough, and contented herself with imagining the ginger-headed, skinned-kneed, little girl running and screaming and laughing there instead.

They wandered down streets of small terraced houses - Morien entertaining her with stories of the friends who'd lived there. How they'd played cowboys and Indians in the streets, Morien spending an entire summer wearing feathers in her hair. How Drake had fallen out of the apple

tree in the Williams's garden, only to be relieved that it was only a toe that was broken and he could still play the violin. How Mrs Bevan, her art teacher, had caused scandal by running off with the milkman - only for Mr Bevan to get it together with the replacement milkwoman. How Davey Miles had proposed to Morien on the corner of Bryn Mawr and Llywarch Street at the tender age of five, and how Morien had turned him down with a giggle and a toffee. And where Morien had kissed Annie Sayce. Just a touch, but....

"...I knew then, you know? I was seven. And I just had a feeling that something was different about me. I didn't know the words or anything or understand what that difference was. I just knew that all those stories that I read about princes and princesses, I was always so uninterested in the princes. I went running home to talk to mam about it and...." She stopped walking for a moment, and sighed a deep sigh. "It went out of my head, because I got home and found that mam was just back from the doctor's."

Striker didn't say anything. She just put her arm back round Morien's shoulders, welcoming the returning arm around her waist. And they carried on in silence. For a while.

They walked as far as the High School, where Morien and Drake had studied and where their father still taught. It was a large complex, based around an older building that still had ivy clinging to its brickwork, despite the tugging of many generations of destructive young hands. There was a modern science block; an extension that boasted a well-stocked library; an ugly, but comprehensive gymnasium; and a playing field that was currently hosting a game of cricket. They sat on the edge of the grass and watched for a while, neither of them following what was going on, and neither of them caring, simply enjoying the sunshine, the peace, and the irregular but hypnotic slap of leather on willow. They half-dozed with the afternoon.

"Can I ask you a personal question?" Striker's voice was low and hazy.

"Mmm?" Morien wasn't sure if she could say more than that. She felt too contented, too lethargic, to think.

"How did your family take it when you... came out?"

An inexplicable grin suddenly shone on Morien's face.

"What?" Striker asked, echoing the expression.

"Just remembering telling them," Morien replied.

"So what happened?"

"It took me years to figure out that I wasn't miraculously going to change and stop being interested in the princesses, you know? So, that was it - seventeen years old, and after a little bit of making sure...." Striker lifted an eyebrow. "...I consciously accepted I was a lesbian. But it's one thing accepting it yourself, and another to admit it to anyone else. So... I picked out a day: a Saturday morning breakfast, when I knew we'd all be together. I didn't sleep a wink the night

before, worrying about their reaction, what they might say and practising what I was going to say... how I was going to phrase it. My stomach was in knots when I sat down at that table."

She paused. "And?" Striker said.

"Well... I told them.... And Drake glanced up from some football magazine he was reading and said, 'Yeah, we knew that, Mo, can you pass the marmalade?'"

They both laughed. But Morien continued, "Actually, it's funny now, but I felt really upset at the time. I wanted them to acknowledge what I'd said, you know?"

Striker nodded.

"But Dad did. He gave me a big hug and told me he knew how hard that must have been for me to say, and how brave I was for saying it. And that whatever, he loved me and was proud of me and he wanted me to be happy." She smiled. "I love my dad."

"He seems like a really nice guy."

There was a silence, and Morien felt a sudden weight of guilt. She looked at the woman beside her, long legs stretched out on the grass. She could still feel Striker's lips on her own, and hoped that the feeling would never leave her. Striker's head was up, staring at the sky, her hair escaping, as it always did, from the confines of its braid; but even from this angle Morien could distinguish the furrow on her brow.

"What about your dad?"

Striker looked down, but her gaze seemed to have captured some sky. "What about him?"

"How did he react to... your... sexuality."

"Never told him. It's none of his fucking business who I choose to.... It's nobody's business but mine." She bit her lip. "You're very lucky, Morien. You have a fantastic relationship with your father. Cherish it."

She got up, and swiping grass off her shorts, walked off. Her hands in her pockets. Morien got to her feet and followed, watching Striker from behind as she went through the now familiar motions of lighting a cigarette.

"I'm sorry," Morien said, finally, as they got the school gates.

Striker turned round. Her voice was bitter. "What are you apologising for? It's not your fault that your father is a decent human being and mine is an asshole. Makes you what you are, and me what I am, doesn't it?"

"And what are you, Striker?" Morien's voice betraying aggravation.

"I'm a bitch, honey, get used to it."

"Then why the hell do I like you so much then?"

Striker inhaled smoke leisurely, letting it escape through her nose. "I dunno. Maybe that bump on the head made you crazy."

The words froze Morien mid-thought. She blinked, unsure of what she'd just heard. Striker couldn't have said that, could she? Not Striker?

Then anger as bitter as Morien had ever felt flooded her. She couldn't speak, afraid of what might come out. She was afraid of crying. She was afraid of the wave of nausea that washed over her. And right now she was more afraid of herself than anything else.

She turned her back on Striker and bolted down the road.

You jerk.

Striker started moving.

You stupid, fucking jerk.

How could I do that?

How could I...?

Striker threw her cigarette into the gutter and ran after Morien. Despite her long legs, it wasn't easy to catch up with her, but she did, grabbing her arm to stop her.

"I'm sorry, sweetheart."

Morien didn't move.

"I get angry," Striker continued, struggling to make her understand. Struggling to make herself understand. "And when I get angry I don't think. I would never want to hurt you. Morien, I lo...."

She felt the stinging pain in her cheek before she realised that Morien had turned round.

They stared at each other: shocked blue locked on shocked green. There was anger, bitterness, hatred warring between them.

And then Morien spoke, her voice shuddering. "Striker... I'm so sorry. Cariad... I should never...."

She had never planned to hit her. Her anger had dictated that she either strike out or explode. Her

hand had made the decision before her brain was even aware of it. She had actually hit her. And it was only now that her brain registered that picking a fight with Striker West was not sensible. It wasn't even sane.

Striker blinked. "You're sorry...." She put a hand to her cheek. "Don't be sorry, you saved me the job. Jesus...." She spat blood into the gutter. "You could teach Bruce a thing or two."

"Oh, don't...." Morien put her hand over her mouth. There was so much shame in her eyes that Striker almost laughed. But it was a laugh partly of relief. The idea of facing Morien's anger had almost had her back on the train to London.

"Hey...." Striker removed Morien's hand from her mouth. "Don't you dare be sorry. I deserved every bit of that. In fact, if you got any more in you I probably deserve that too. You're not crazy. I'm crazy. For all sorts of reasons I'm crazy. But that doesn't give me an excuse for hurting you."

"And it doesn't give me an excuse for hurting you...."

"Then I guess that makes us quits, huh?"

Morien looked up into Striker's waiting, hopeful gaze. "If you're sure...?"

"Come here," Striker said and took the confused Welsh woman in her arms.

Morien snuggled into the embrace, wrapping her own arms round Striker's back, relishing the smell of Striker's sun-warmed skin beneath her cheek. She wondered if she could risk kissing her neck, but felt Striker move.

"Let's go home," she said.

Morien felt able to smile at last, and she took her hand and led her home.

* * * * *

They opened the front door to music. The same breathtaking music to which Striker had woken that morning.

Sullivan was in the dining room, exercise books piled around him at the table, glasses perched on his nose, red pen soaring in mid-air as he conducted his invisible orchestra. He glanced up as they stuck their heads round the door. "Sssh," he said, "it's getting to the really good bit." So, they retreated to the sitting room and let the music come to its climax.

It was cool indoors, a blissful remit from the heavy sun and their exercised emotions. They sat on the sofa, calm and quiet, letting relaxation and harmony wash over them... until Easey landed on Striker's lap with a silent thump and a loud, "Shit!" from the American. "Damn cat." But she

willingly stroked the tabby's back, while Morien petted Easey's cheeks and rubbed her little pink nose with her own.

And Striker added another Morien fantasy to her anthology. *Nose-rubbing... now that would be a first.*

"I want to give Kish a call, see how Dan really is," Striker finally said, as Easey settled between them. Her body relaxed further into the comfortable sofa. "But that involves moving."

Morien stirred... slightly. "Is my bag still on the floor down there?"

Striker reached down the side of the sofa and felt for the now familiar handles of Morien's tapestry bag.

Morien went through the contents, manoeuvring Easey's nose out of the way, pulling out sketchpad, poetry book... ah, mobile phone. A piece of paper fell out of the book as she placed it on the table. Striker picked it up, idly unfolding it while barely looking at it. At its head sat the crest of the East Metropolitan Borough Council. It seemed to be a list of names, jobs and contact numbers. She was about to refold it and take the mobile from Morien, when something jumped out at her.

"Jesus Christ...."

"What?" Morien asked.

"How long have you had this in here?"

Morien had the vague memory of reading on the Tube. "A week or more. Why? What is it?"

"Is this an official council document?"

Morien looked over her shoulder. "Yes. Well, an old one. It was updated, so I included the update in the proposal, but used that printout as notepaper at the back of my...." She saw where Striker's finger was pointing.

It was a list of council employees associated with buildings and regeneration - their posts, their details - and near the bottom of the list danced a single name.

Gilbert Lamprey.

Chapter 19: *Fear of a Name*¹⁰

Striker was woken by a flurry of muted activity. Doors opening and closing. The creak of the

stairs. Water splashing in old pipes. The sound of voices downstairs.

Monday morning.

It was hot. Hotter than yesterday. The humidity replaced her duvet that had bunched itself at her feet during the night. The curtains hung motionless at the open window. The outside air felt tired.

Slipping on a pair of boxers under her t-shirt, she padded downstairs.

They were in the kitchen, Sullivan at the table, shovelling cornflakes into his mouth and splashing milk on a loud and indiscriminate tie. Morien at the sink, dividing food into three bowls, a furry expectation of cats winding round her bare legs: black and tabby. Only two for breakfast. She was talking to them in Welsh, the words indistinct, but her tone soft and expressive and wonderfully warm. Her head was bare, the long auburn strands pushed behind her ears and dancing on her forehead, the crimson scar vivid under ginger fuzz. It didn't matter to Striker. The scar was part of Morien, therefore it was beautiful.

Morien was still wearing pyjamas, short, stripy-pink pyjamas that bared her arms and drew to a loving finish at her lower thigh. Striker's eyes flittered up, but found themselves alighting on the rounded perch of a slim buttock, the stripy material stretched across it....

"Good morning." The voice made her jump, and she looked up to meet Sullivan's eyes, twinkling, warning, twinkling....

Yeah, that's right, asshole, get caught ogling his daughter.

"Hi, Striker." Morien looked up from her work, her eyes sparkling.

"Morning," Striker replied, smiling at her, and then glancing sheepishly at Sullivan.

"We'll have to take the bus to Caernarfon," Morien said. "Dad's taking the car."

It was Sullivan's turn to look shamefaced. "Sorry," he said. "You're welcome to drive the old banger any time, Striker. I can add you to the insurance if you want. But I've got piles of books to take in this morning."

"That's fine," Striker replied, quietly relieved that she wouldn't have to drive the ancient Volvo.

"But make sure the two of you take an umbrella. It's likely to rain later." Morien rolled her eyes and smiled at Striker behind her father's back. She then bent to place the bowls of cat food on the floor by the back door, only to gift Striker with the subtle play of muscles up the back of her legs, and again the material straining against the neat mounds.... She just wanted to touch....

A spoon clattered in its bowl, and Striker jumped. But Sullivan got up from the table, his back to her, heading towards the sink. "Mo, love, you wouldn't mind... would you?"

"Yes, dad, I only came up here to do your washing up for you," Morien scolded, but her tone was good-natured.

"I'll do the washing up," Striker said.

Morien looked at her, dubiously. "You wash up?"

* * * * *

They had handed the council printout to Idomeneo at Caernarfon Police Station. He had taken it with a slowly raised eyebrow and, Striker thought, the faintest gleam of one-upmanship. Undeniable proof that linked Gilbert Lamprey directly to both the East Metropolitan Borough Council and the buildings on Tumblety Street.

And so she registered, and Striker West was officially under the watchful eye of Detective Inspector Jones.

They found a café and enjoyed a light lunch. A salad for Morien, a steak sandwich without the garnish for Striker, who then spent the rest of the meal stealing tomato slices from Morien's plate.

"Why don't you order your own salad?"

"It tastes better this way."

Striker wouldn't have dared do this a week ago. Morien smiled to herself, secretly thrilled that her friendship with Striker had become so strong, and slapped her hand playfully as she allowed the American to pilfer another piece of tomato.

Caernarfon staggered under the oppressive heat. They had wandered down streets, window-shopping, and finally explored the stone-cool of the castle, but now stood on the parapet of the West Gate, trying to catch the faintest breath of wind from the Menai Strait. But the air seemed trapped between the island of Anglesey and the mainland. Striker wondered, for the umpteenth time, why she had brought her jacket.

She had dressed to look smart for the police station... at least smart for her. Plain white t-shirt, tucked into black jeans (to Morien's secret delight) and her big, black boots. She was going to leave the jacket.

But, "It's going to rain", Sullivan had said, the weather forecasters had said, and Morien had said as they had walked out of the front door. "Do you want an umbrella?" she'd been asked. Striker had opted instead for her familiar leather to keep her dry, only to find herself sitting under brilliant sunshine, the sky stalwartly blue, with not a cloud in sight.

"Anglesey looks like a dreamland," Morien said, abstractedly. "It's like the air's too thick to see." She leaned against the parapet, her head down.

"You all right?" Striker asked, placing a gentle hand on her shoulder.

Morien looked up at her. "Just a little too tired and a little too hot. I didn't sleep too well last night, and my pills sometimes make me..." She trailed off as if Striker would understand.

"Come on, let's get into the shade." Striker guided her backwards, and they sat down in the shadow of the castle walls, the ancient stone seeming cool despite the weather. "Where's the umbrella?"

Morien pulled the small fold-up out of her bag, and Striker opened it, positioning it in such a way that they were further sheltered from the sun.

An arm slid round Morien's shoulders, and the Welsh woman found her head resting gently on the broad shoulder. She shut her eyes and felt Striker's featherlight fingers brushing strands of hair from her forehead. It felt wonderful, cooling... she sighed.

Then the sonorous, balmy voice in her ear. "When I was growing up, my mom would read all these stories to me about princes and princesses who lived in these great castles. King Arthur in Camelot. Pwyll's court at Arbeth. Rapunzel in her tower. I would dream of living in a castle, being one of those princesses. Hell, being one of those princes." Morien chuckled, drowsily. "I wanted to make friends with dragons, and battle giants and see if there were fairies at the bottom of the yard."

A seagull called from somewhere above them, but even its cry muted in the heat. And then the sweet, low voice.

"But it was always in my head, never real. Philadelphia's a great city, with some amazing buildings - maybe I'll take you there one day - but the only castles I knew were skyscrapers. Castles weren't real. Princes and princesses and knights in shining armour didn't exist. And then my mom, who came from this land with all this history and all these stories, vanished, and I would sometimes wonder if she'd ever existed either."

Morien shifted an arm across Striker's stomach, returning her comfortable embrace.

"And then I came to Britain, and everywhere I looked there were old buildings. So the kings and queens weren't what I wanted them to be, and the knights didn't wear shining armour, but the castles were there. And maybe that meant there were dragons and giants, and that my mom was..."

Striker felt a cool flutter on her neck. Morien's eyes were closed, and her breathing smooth and even. Gentle perspiration gave her a look of sweet glazing. Striker watched as a bead of sweat trailed from under her embroidered cream headscarf, down her neck and slithered further, disappearing into the folds of her white, sleeveless blouse.

Striker wanted to follow it - she felt her tongue tingling with the thought of licking that sweet droplet from a smooth, succulent breast. But she swallowed a groan instead and allowed the flush of arousal to lull to an underscore.

This was heaven.

They had been through hell. They had had gangsters after them, and guns haunting them. They had seen violence and death. She was facing a drugs conviction. She was unemployed and guessed she had enough money to last her about a month, and that was before rent, bills and food. It was as hot as damnation....

But now I'm the knight in the castle, and I have my princess sleeping in my arms. This is heaven. If I never touch her the way I want to touch her. If it all falls apart tomorrow, I've had this.

* * * * *

They were awoken by a dark shadow. A man stood over them, silhouetted against the sun now lowering itself into the Menai Strait.

"Come on, ladies," he said, "castle's closing soon."

"Wha...?" Morien murmured, blinking up at him. "What time is it?"

"Five to six, love, come on."

"Five to six?!" Morien's eyes were wide now. "Striker, come on.... Don't forget the umbrella...."

They made it to the bus station in time to see their chosen transport heave down the road without them.

"Bloody hell," Morien said. "That was the last bus."

"You're kidding?!" Striker panted, willing the bus driver to see them and do a quick u-turn. He didn't. "What are we going to do?"

Morien stared down the road. "We're either stuck here overnight, or we're going to take the number sixty-two, get off at the closest stop to Lleudraeth, and walk the rest of the way."

The thought of staying overnight in a motel room with Morien caroused in Striker's head. It made her feel drunk with possibility. The low hum of arousal suddenly started to crescendo.

And then the ugly face of pride appeared. She had very little money, and she couldn't let Morien pay for something else. The sun's heat was no longer so strong, although it was still sticky with

humidity. The walk wouldn't be too bad.

"What do you want to do?" she asked.

Morien looked at Striker, the same thoughts waltzing in her mind. But she felt tired and stiff and much as the idea of a night of forbidden passion in a low-price bed and breakfast tempted her....
"Number sixty-two," she said.

* * * * *

This bus, like the first, rattled along the road as if wanting to shake its bolts loose. They had to hold on to the seat for dear life in order that they didn't end up on the floor, and they had to all but shout to be heard.

But the speed which the vehicle somehow managed to gain, caused a glorious breeze, which had them almost screaming with pleasure. It felt like a wonderful carnival ride. It felt as if they were children again. They thrilled with the pleasure of just being.

Their conversation twisted and turned with the bus, until Striker said, "So what's with Idomeneo?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean *Idomeneo*?"

Morien grinned. "Hell of a name to dump on a child, isn't it? His parents were leading lights in the local amateur operatic society." She looked at Striker's blank face. "Mozart."

"Oh. And he's got kids? What are they called? Rigoletto? Madam Butterfly...."

"La Traviata Jones. Has a ring to it, doesn't it?" She grinned. "Actually, you might have noticed, Idomeneo's a big Dickens fan." She watched Striker's face change, her amusement growing with Striker's growing dismay, until she decided to put her out of her misery. "Martin, David, Nicholas and Philip...."

Striker let out a breath. "Shit... and I thought there was some poor kid out there called Uriah...."

"His daughter's called Bella, if that helps. And Philip really is known as Pip. And, at school, because every year had at least two David Joneses, let alone Davids, Idomeneo's David was always referred to as Dai Dickens."

"You're kidding me?!"

"No. In the end it became a game whenever a new David arrived. There was Dai Manchester, Dai Tardy - cos he was always late - Dai Crispy Duck...."

"Okay, now you really are kidding me...."

"No, really. His actual name's David Wong. His family run the Lotus Flower restaurant on Glyndwr Street."

"You guys are nuts. You're telling me there was a guy at your school named after Chinese food?"

"What's the difference between that and being named after sporting ability?"

Striker felt the brief dulling of anger, and her voice quietened to a hiss. "You're never going to let this go are you? I'm just Striker, okay? Drop it!"

"But *why*?"

"Because it *hurts*."

"It's only a name."

"Not to me it isn't."

The bus groaned to a halt.

Morien suddenly got up, grabbing her bag. "This is our stop." She made her way down the aisle, Striker at her heels, and they found themselves on the grass verge of and otherwise deserted crossroads. As the bus drove off, Striker wondered if that was the last sign of civilisation.

"I told you we had to walk the rest of the way," Morien said, watching the final belch of exhaust from their transport.

"You did," Striker sighed. And then saw the concern on Morien's face. "What?"

Morien pointed and Striker looked.

"Oh shit."

Behind them, north towards Caernarfon, was deceptive blue. In front of them, in the direction of Lleudraeth, the sky looked bruised. Greys, purples and an unhealthy looking yellow decorated the clouds which cascaded down to touch the hills. The rain was coming and coming fast.

"Oh shit," Striker said again, her face paled. "Um... Morien...."

"What?"

"I... um... kinda left the umbrella at the castle." Morien looked round at her, slowly. Her eyes were sharp green and unreadable. "You've got your cellphone, haven't you? Couldn't you call a cab... or won't your dad be home by now... or something?"

Morien smiled, grimly. "You can't get a signal out here... the hills."

Striker looked down at her boots, as they toyed with a clump of grass. "Sorry."

"You're an idiot," Morien said.

"I know."

Morien grabbed her arm and pushed her forward. "Come on then, idiot, let's go get wet."

* * * * *

They walked in silence for a while along the rough, grass verge. A low hedge ran along the right side of the road. Beyond it was a grass field, devoid of its usual sheep. *Sensible buggers, they've found themselves some shelter somewhere*, Morien thought. She couldn't figure out where. There wasn't a tree or a building that she could see. To their left the grass verge dropped to a steep bank at the bottom of which was a stream, sluggish in the yellow light. In the distance, on either side, rose hills, grey and hazy and in front of them, imagined rather than seen were the remote roofs of Lleudraeth.

The world seemed silent: a strange, alien expectation. The calm before the mother of all storms.

Morien glanced up at Striker as she lit another cigarette. The hiss of the flame seemed to echo in the still air. She wondered what the tall woman was thinking. She wondered if she still felt the touch of their lips, a touch that had possessed Morien through the sticky night.

Friends kiss each other, a voice had argued. *It was just a peck. Friends kiss each other. It was just a peck. Just a peck... just a peck....*

It meant nothing.

Mixed messages.

Striker isn't attracted to me, the voice had said. *Why the hell would Striker be attracted to me?*

But sometimes... Morien imagined... the way she looked at her... The way her lips had felt... *The way her hands feel on me....*

Striker isn't attracted to me. She said so.

And she would wake with a start, her body hot with sleep and want. And her hands shook with the need to touch herself and the fear of simply feeling.

She still felt tired, with the weight of the sky on her shoulders. She looked up at Striker again, lips wrapped round the cigarette. Her pale cheek showed the slightest discoloration in this odd light, and Morien realised with a judder of shock that that was not a reminder of Bruce; it had been made by her hand.

She wondered about Striker's anger, about her gentility, about the words that she had been speaking as Morien had drifted to sleep on the castle gate.

"Striker," she finally said, "I'd like to help you find your mother."

Striker around at her. "You don't have to do that."

"I want to help, please let me."

"I don't know what you could do...."

"Well, what have done to find her so far?"

Striker sighed. "When I first arrived I placed an ad in a couple of national papers. Here...." She pulled her wallet from her jeans and unfolded a fragile piece of newspaper.

Seeking Judith Helena Bailey West, wife of Edward Clayton West of Philadelphia, U.S.A., daughter of the late Gerald and Elizabeth Bailey of Wimbledon, London. Last located in south-east London. If you have information, please contact....

Morien handed the advertisement back to Striker who refolded it and placed it, carefully, back in her wallet.

"I got a few leads, but they came to nothing. I placed ads in the local paper in West London where her family lived. I've placed ads in the Surrey papers where her parents retired. Again, a few leads, a few time-wasters, but nothing. I place an ad every few weeks... somewhere.... You never know, right?" She shrugged, thumbs in pockets, cigarette clasped between two fingers. "And for a while I've just been phoning. I've called every West in the London telephone directories. I'm now most of the way through the Baileys. When I finish them I guess I'll move on to the Surrey directory."

"And nothing?"

"Sometimes I think it's making a difference. Sometimes I think I'm getting somewhere. Sometimes someone will say, 'Oh, yeah, I know a Judith Bailey'; except it'll turn out this Judith married a Bailey and her birth name was Morgenstern. Or her second name was Ethel. Or she was born in some tiny town in western Australia." She blew out an annoyed lungful of smoke. "Then there are those who just put the phone down. That's tough, you know? I'm left with a dead line and the thought... could the woman I've just spoken to... could she be my mother? Could I have spoken to my mother and not even have known it?" She sighed. "Or maybe I've just been fucking with myself all this time and she's been dead for twenty two years." She glanced at Morien. "She sure as hell didn't die in London though."

And then, with a sizzle, her cigarette went out...

Morien laughed. "Good shot!"

"Fuck, is everyone trying to make me quit?!" Striker said, staring up at the dark, wet sky.

And the heavens opened.

It was as if someone had overturned a divine bucket of water on the landscape. In barely a minute, both of them were soaked, hair and headwear plastered and clothes wringing wet.

"You know," Striker said above the downpour, slicking overlong, dripping bangs back from her face, her voice a crescendo of frustration, "I knew it was too good to be true. It's been three days since it's rained. It had to rain. It always fucking rains in this stupid, godforsaken, fucking country."

"May I remind you who left the umbrella at the castle," Morien said.

"Stop fucking nagging," Striker said, sulkily and handed her jacket to Morien. Morien was tempted to take it, but she wasn't cold and she was already too wet for it to make a difference. She waved it away, something for which Striker couldn't help but be grateful, not because the jacket offered protection, but merely that Morien's white blouse was beginning to turn beautifully see-through. The rain sculpted her body, breasts seeming to swell further against the translucent material, two enticing tips straining beneath. She wore a delicate white bra, decorated by a restrained touch of lace. A picture of demure sensuality. Suddenly, Striker wanted to run her hands where the rain was running and she took a step forward.

A splash of water and a car hurtled towards them, sleek silver out of the storm. Its lights illuminating the rainfall like English arrows, and Morien, automatically, put her hand up to hail it. It slowed. Striker didn't move.

"Come on," Morien said. "This is not the main road into town. It's way past rush-hour. There won't be another chance of a lift."

Striker didn't move.

Morien started towards the car, which lay droning at the verge, a little way ahead, red tail-lights blaring in the green and grey. She looked back.

Striker didn't move.

Why did this seem wrong?

It was a Beemer.

A brand new, silver BMW.

And it reeked of money and power.

"Come on...."

She had a feeling, a deep-down, gut feeling that chilled her soul in the warm rain.

"Morien, don't...."

Ahead the car door opened, flooding the interior with light. A shape pulled itself out of the car, almost shaking itself in the downpour.

"Morien, for fuck's sake...."

Striker was running now, towards her friend, knowing that that way lay violence. Morien turned, looked towards the car, saw the man, wide-shouldered, barrel-chested, and in the silvery sparks of rain, the glint of steel being pulled from his tailored suit. She stopped, backed up, her sandals almost failing to grip on the wet tarmac.

She could feel her heart stopping. She could hear her breath coming in short, terrified gasps. She backed up against something hard. And suddenly she was falling sideways, dizzy and rolling hard down the grass bank, held tightly in Striker's grasp, her bag pressed sharply between them.

They landed almost at the stream, the grass angled beneath them, greasy from the sudden drenching. Striker looked up. She could see the bulked shadow of the at the top of the slope. And he could see them.

Sitting ducks.

She grabbed Morien's hand and pulled before the gun went off, a big, echoing bang in the noise of falling water. Something splashed in the stream behind them.

They dashed along the stream, hearing the muted sounds of voices and footsteps above them. Striker ahead, losing her grasp on Morien's wet hand. She could hear her friend behind her, her breath bursting from her.

Then she heard a gasp, and she turned to see Morien drop like a stone.

There had been no second blast, but it was a moment before Striker realised that Morien hadn't been shot. This was something different.

Oh my God, not now.

Morien's mouth opened and let out a low cry, and Striker crashed to her knees at her side as the woman's body started to convulse. She wanted to gather her in her arms, but she had learnt better than that.

She didn't move her; the ground was soft, made softer by the rain. She only kept a loose hand on her arms, to ensure her body didn't slip.

Striker could hear the sounds of pursuit above them. But then she discerned that the sound was too far away. The brothers had overshot them, not realising that the two women had stopped. She and Morien were still in the open, although partly concealed by the slope of the bank. She pulled them back against the grass as tightly as she dared, but knowing that if she held on to Morien she could hurt her. If the men leant right over the edge of the slope and looked down, they would be seen. They were still sitting targets.

But the rain, the rain that just moments ago she had been cursing, would, perhaps, go a little way to hiding them.

Morien's breath was coming irregularly, her eyelids fluttering, but she was making no sound. Her eyes were closed, her skin had taken on a slight blue tinge. Stroking her face, Striker bent down keeping her mouth close to Morien's ear, whispering as quietly as air, "It's okay, honey. We'll be okay, don't worry. Sshhh, now, it'll be okay."

"They came this way," a loud voice shouted almost directly above, and as startling as a bullet. "I heard something."

"Can you see 'em?"

Striker bent lower, trying desperately to cover Morien's lighter clothes, hoping against hope that the dark leather of her jacket and her dark hair would help to hide them in the shadows of rain. She was shaking almost as much as Morien now, from the downpour and from fear.

How long had it been? It felt like hours that they'd been crouched on the bank, Morien's seizing body covered by Striker's long frame. It was only minutes, wasn't it? Only a few minutes. But Striker knew enough that if the fit lasted much longer, Morien was in trouble.

"Can't see a bloody thing. Fuck, I'm soaked." The voice was moving away.

"Let's go back, Nige. We know where they're going."

"Yeah, hopefully a nice warm pub. Fucking Taffland."

"Gil'll fucking kill us for losing 'em."

Barely turning her head, a flash at the corner of her eye, Striker thought she caught the bleached lightning of Nigel's hair in the silver gloom.

"Gil can fucking come back and look for them then." There was a laugh. Retreating. "Besides," she caught, "it was pure fucking luck that we saw them. The plan's the..." A car door slammed, then the muffled sound of an engine bursting to life.

And Morien stilled under her. Striker thought she could hear her breathing, though it seemed impossible with the sound of the rain and the car above. The tyres peeled themselves off the wet road and swished away.

She sat up a little and looked down at Morien's face. Morien was catching her breath and she looked back at Striker with clear eyes, now brimming with tears.

"I'm sorry," she whispered.

Striker couldn't stand to see the pain in her eyes. She wanted to hug the pain away, but instead, she gently turned Morien onto her side and, positioning herself alongside her on the wet grass, wiped saliva away from her mouth, and stroked sodden auburn hair away from her cheek. Morien sobbed, great gulping sobs that shook her already strained body.

"I'm sorry," she mouthed, barely able to get the words through her tears.

"Hey, there's nothing to be sorry for," Striker said, brushing rain and tears from Morien's face. "You're fine, you're okay, sweetie, you're okay."

Morien reared up suddenly, her eyes wide, "Striker, the men..."

Striker coaxed her back down. "They're gone. Now, lie down for just a little longer, okay? Just breathe."

Morien lay down again, her head too heavy to hold up. She was shivering. Not from cold, but from fear and shock and deep, terrible shame. She felt the heavy weight of Striker's jacket placed on top of her and welcomed its warmth and scent. She hid her face in its folds, and listened to raindrops drumming on the leather.

"It's wet," she finally said from the depths of the jacket.

Striker stifled a laugh. "Yeah, honey, it's wet. We'll go in a minute. I need you to take a moment, okay?"

The rain was easing, or so Striker thought. Maybe it was just her fear easing. Either way the

world was looking just a little lighter. She listened. Nothing but rain. No voices. No cars. There was a distant roll of thunder. Nothing else. She looked at Morien again; she was so still, and for a dreadful moment thought she was unconscious.

"Morien?" She rubbed her shoulder through the jacket

"Mmm?"

"How're you feeling?"

"Tired and headachey. I want to go home."

"You think you can get up?"

Morien answered by shakily getting to her feet. She held the jacket out to Striker, but the American shook her head. "No, you keep it."

"But you're soaked."

"So, it isn't going to make much difference now."

Morien looked up the steep slope. "We'll have to get back up to the road."

Striker followed her gaze. "I think we ought to keep off the road, just in case. Is there anywhere we can shelter round here?"

Morien rubbed her head. She was pale and had dark streaks underlining her eyes. "Not really. We may as well go into town."

"How far is it?"

"Not far. Mile and a half, maybe a bit further," she said with a weak smile.

"So we stay here and get wet, or walk it and get wet."

"And at least if we walk it we're closer to home."

"Do you think you can make it?"

Morien had spent her childhood roaming the hills and coast around Lleuadaeth, but never had a mile and a half seemed so far. Her head was pounding. Every single muscle in her body was aching and was aching more each minute with the drumming of the rain.

She pulled her muddy, soaked bag onto her shoulder. "Yes," she said. "Yes, I can make it."

Continued in Chapter 20....

¹ *The Lobster Quadrille* by Lewis Carroll, from *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*

² Anghenfil = freak

³ Dw i'n iawn, tad. I ddweud y gwir... = I'm fine, dad. To tell the truth....

⁴ "Into this wild abyss" - originally taken from Book II of John Milton's *Paradise Lost*, but I nabbed it from the front of Philip Pullman's *His Dark Materials* trilogy.

⁵ "The Last Homely House in the West" - Tolkien's Rivendell: a stopping place on many a long and hazardous journey in *The Hobbit* and *Lord of the Rings*

⁶ The full quote is "A heart well worth winning, and well won. A heart that, once won, goes through fire and water for the winner, and never changes, and is never daunted" from Charles Dickens' *Our Mutual Friend*.

⁷ A poem by A. E. Housman from his signature work *A Shropshire Lad*.

⁸ One of the ways to tell someone to "Fuck off" in Welsh.

⁹ Slebog = slut

¹⁰ "Call him Voldemort, Harry. Always use the proper name for things. Fear of a name increases fear of the thing itself." Albus Dumbledore in "Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone" by J.K. Rowling.

The Athenaeum's Scroll Archive

~ Misplaced People ~

by Devize

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Chapter 20: *Spinning out gold from the hollow of the heart*¹

They moved slowly. Painfully slowly.

Constantly, Striker would be listening... for the hiss of tyres on the road above the onslaught of wet sound. For the sound of voices. Foreign London accents in this inaccessible Welsh waterland. The rain sounded like Cockney laughter.

She would jump at shadows in the downpour, seeing large hulks stepping out from curtains of water, seeing glints of metal in the shining drops, seeing the shrouded figure of Gilbert Lamprey

rolling back the thunder.

On more than one occasion Morien would find her feet slipping under her and she would clutch on to Striker's strong arm for support. Already Striker had taken the bag from her. More and more, the American found herself half-carrying her friend along the path of the swelling stream. Morien seemed weightless in her arms. "You're too thin, my love. Let me take care of you," she whispered with her arms around her. But, above the rain, Morien didn't hear her.

They stopped, the barest hesitation to catch an instant of air. And finally the question was voiced. "How?" Morien breathed. "How can *they* be up here?"

Striker shook her head in reply. Raindrops sprayed from hair, that shone like obsidian. Her t-shirt clung to her like a second skin. Water was dripping off her chin.

"We were supposed to be safe up here."

"We are safe up here."

Morien stared. "Did you miss what happened back there?"

"This isn't London, Morien."

"Meaning?"

"Meaning this is your territory. You know this place. They don't. It's small. People will notice them. They'll be caught."

They had to be.

"So why didn't we know they were here?"

Striker couldn't answer that. "Come on," she said, holding out a hand.

It had cooled considerably. Morien noticed the shiver that Striker tried to suppress. That's all they needed, both of them sick. They needed to get warmth and shelter, and soon. This time she guided Striker, up the slope.

"Morien, what if they're...."

"I've remembered something...." She slipped again on the mud, and found sturdy hands at her waist. They clambered up the incline on all fours, and stood warily back on the grass verge.

For a moment, Striker wondered if they'd moved at all. Fields all around in the thick rain. The dark slate road winding like a river towards the hills. But this time... she could just make out, not that far ahead on the road, like a scarlet beacon, an old-fashioned, red telephone box, quiet on the corner of a byroad.

Now they were running again, for shelter, hope and a colourful oasis of civilisation. The door creaked open and they sighed to be out of the storm; Morien light-headed, clutching onto the Striker for support. Loose change slipped through wet and shaking fingers, as they fumbled to make the call.

Morien dialled a number.

It seemed an age before anyone answered, while the rain clawed at the glass and flurries of drops mimicked the sound of tyres on tarmac, making them jump. The phone continued to ring.

And then it stopped.

A voice.

"Daddy," Morien's speech was half sob. Striker could hear Sullivan's worried questions fired back. "Dad, could you call Idomeneo. They're up here," another sob. Another question. "We're on the Old North Road. At the phone box by the bridge."

Striker even heard Sullivan's next panicked question. "Cariad, are you hurt?"

"We're okay, dad... we're fine."

Striker mouthed "Doctor". Morien turned her eyes away. Striker snatched the receiver from her hand. "Hello, sir. It's Striker. Would it be possible for you to contact a doctor? Morien's had a seizure and someone ought to check her over. Thank you, Mr Llewelyn. We'll wait here, sir. Don't worry, sir, I promise I'll take care of her." She put the phone down and looked into Morien's accusatory gaze.

"You *told* him." Her voice was venomous.

"And what kind of friend would I be if I hadn't?"

Morien turned in the cramped phone box, pressing her head onto the glass, she looked out into the landscape. Her shoulders shook. Striker could tell that she was crying. She put a hand on Morien's back. "Look, I had to...."

Morien shrugged the hand off.

Striker crossed her arms across her saturated t-shirt and stared outside. The rain, at last, seemed to be easing, the sky lightening. She could see more clearly now. Up the road, Lleuadaeth looked more distinct, its roofs and lights glistening like some remote Celestial City. The byroad crossed the stream over a little bridge, barely more than a footbridge, and wound its way over fields. In the distance there was a building, as if tiptoeing around the extreme edge of town. Its shape looked familiar and Striker wondered if they'd passed it during their wanderings the day before. But they hadn't walked that far out.

There was no sign of any car, despite their willing the sight of the old Volvo. Striker looked out towards Lleuadraeth again, less than a mile away now. They could start walking again.

But, would they come out searching now that the rain was dying?

Striker was suddenly aware: the phone box had been a beacon for them; it could be a beacon for any other passer-by, local or stranger.

"Morien, I think we ought to go back down to the stream."

Morien turned her head slightly in response, saying nothing. Her eyes were red.

"Nigel and Bruce... they might come out again. I think we ought to keep off the road, outta sight."

Morien's whole body sagged, and for a moment, Striker wondered if she was going to faint. But she turned, and met Striker's eyes. "Okay."

They slid their way back down the slope, Morien refusing Striker's helping hand, and stood again by the stream, listening out for the sounds of a car above them. Striker eyed the bridge. The arch beneath was barely big enough to crouch under, let alone seek adequate shelter.

They stood awkwardly, uncomfortably, up against the rough stonework of the bridge. Morien regarded Striker from the corner of her eye. She made an abject picture, hair hanging in rivulets down her face, arms tight across her chest. Morien was incredibly angry with her. She was even more angry with herself.

"You're going to catch your death, you know."

Morien's soft Welsh burr was warming and welcome. Striker smiled. "Ironic, huh? Escape fires and bullets and I end up dying of pneumonia."

Morien held out her hand. "Come here." Striker moved and Morien wrapped her arms round her. "You're not going to die, stalker," she whispered into her neck. "I won't let you."

Striker returned the embrace and the feel of Morien against her made her groan. The slim body felt hot against her own, and the material of their clothes, rendered sheer by the downpour, made the contact feel like moist skin on skin. Morien's breasts pressed against her ribs, her breath was hot on her neck and it was a feeling that flowed through her like a river of warm honey, pooling at her groin.

She leant back against the wall, taking the Welsh woman with her, not wanting to lose a second of contact. In a jumble of legs, she felt her thigh slip between Morien's, a gentle insinuation, material lightly caressing material.

It was the adrenaline, she knew. The thrill of being chased. Desire was suddenly coursing through her body, nerve endings quivering at the contact. She could almost feel an answering tingle.

Morien looked up, and her eyes were as dark a green as Striker had seen; they seemed deep and endless. The dusky gaze flicked down to kiss Striker's lips, and Striker found herself entranced by Morien's own mouth. Her lips seemed suddenly swollen, pink; her tongue peeped out just to wet them. Striker's own tongue responded in kind and she moved forward, drawn....

And Morien shut her mouth. Her gaze was abruptly shuttered. She glanced up at Striker, a fearful, apologetic glance. A single word was in that look. *Stop*. She rested her forehead against Striker's shoulder and Striker could hear her breathing, hard.

The tall woman simply held her, loosely. "It's okay," she whispered, so only she could hear. *I understand. It's only the adrenaline. You're tired. You're sick. It's raining. This is not the time or the place. You love your girlfriend.*

And then they both tensed.

The sound of a car, just above them, pulling up by the bridge.

Morien's head was up. She looked at Striker and spoke, her voice like air, "It's not the Volvo. I'd recognise it...."

Rain still pattered around them.

Morien leant backwards in Striker's arms... ever so slightly. She lifted her eyes.

There was the barest squeak of a car door opening.

She dived back towards Striker, terror evident in her eyes. "Silver," she mouthed.

They pressed themselves against the bridge, sliding across the stonework to the arch across the stream. Striker squeezed herself under the bridge, crouching in the flow. Morien crammed herself in next to her, her sandalled feet paddling in the shallow water.

A footstep above them. Two.

A murmur of voices. They couldn't make out the words. They were moving.

Someone was coming down the bank, mud and grass squelching underfoot. The women pressed themselves against the arch.

There was a man standing at the foot of the bank, a big man: they could see smart shoes now coated in dirt, suit trousers....

A voice as loud and slow as thunder seemed to echo in their hiding place.

"Morien, lle dach chi?"²

They breathed in a rush. The stream started running again. They could hear the sweet dance of the rain.

"Idomeneo!" Morien called, her voice echoing against the walls. She pushed herself out of the tunnel and found herself on her knees before the large policeman.

Idomeneo bent down to help her up, as he did so, spotting Striker crawling through the stream to extricate herself from the archway. "Getting caught in the rain wasn't enough, then?" he said.

Striker gave him a look of thunder. *That's all we fucking need, an amateur comedian.* "They're up here. Bruce, Nigel and Gilbert Lamprey, whoever the hell he is. What the fuck are you going to do about it?"

* * * * *

It was a silent journey in the silver Ford as Idomeneo and his young colleague drove them home. Striker and Morien were slumped on the back seat, staring out of opposing windows, hands touching.

They could hear the wash of windscreen wipers and the gentle murmur of Welsh between Idomeneo and Constable John Smith. *He had to be, Striker thought, Alas, Smith and fucking Jones.*

Morien looked exhausted. Her eyes were closed and her skin pale against the dark car seat. Every ounce of life had been drained from her in the past hours. Her eyes fluttered open for a moment, and she caught a glimpse of cerulean blue in the dusk of the car. She was too tired to speak now, but she blinked slowly at Striker as if conversing with one of her cats. And Striker understood: trust, understanding... love.

Morien closed her eyes.

The drive only lasted ten minutes.

Striker found herself carrying the shattered Welsh woman up the now familiar pathway and in through the open front door, past an ashen-faced Sullivan and a grey-haired gentleman who turned out to be the family doctor. Sullivan had already drawn a hot bath for his daughter, and once clean and warm, she was examined by Dr Probert in the privacy of her bedroom.

Striker showered, chuckling with an almost manic irony as the hot water rained down on her. Then, in the comfort of the sitting room - wrapped in a pair of pyjamas and a towelling robe that

Sullivan had pressed into her hand, and sipping at soup - she was questioned by Idomeneo.

There seemed far too little to tell.

Idomeneo sighed. "I'll be back tomorrow, if you remember anything. And to talk to Morien."

"In the meantime?"

"Uniform will be out... but keep your head down."

That was it.

She was left alone. Soup finished, and two sleepy cats pawing at her seat on the sofa. It was a lovely room: cosy, with soft furnishings, and dark wood that didn't detract from the breadth or the light. Again there were photographs everywhere. Endless unknown family members, old and young.

(It made her think of her own family. Aunt Claire would have her shot if she ever set foot near their house again. Hell, Aunt Claire would probably pull the trigger herself.)

Pictures of Morien and a young man she recognised as Drake. Pictures of a toddler and a baby. A wedding picture of Drake and a striking blonde. An older wedding picture of a mop-haired Sullivan, uncomfortable in a neat grey suit, with a pretty auburn-haired woman on his arm. And there was a picture of a skinny girl with strawberry hair, green eyes and a quiet smile. *God, she was so cute.*

Striker found herself staring at the girl... wondering. Was that before or after she lost her mother? Was that before or after she kissed Annie Sayce?

The phone rang and Striker was jerked from her reverie. Sullivan was upstairs with Morien. It seemed unfair to interrupt them. She heaved herself up from the sofa, much to the cats' delight, and picked up the phone in the hallway.

"Hello... er... Llewelyn residence."

There was a long pause. "Who's that?" The voice seemed familiar.

Striker thought. Considering what had happened, should she be blithely giving out her name to anybody who asked? "It depends," she said, "on who this is."

Another pause. "This is Drake Llewelyn. Do I know you?" The Welsh accent was suddenly so precise, so pronounced, that Striker almost laughed.

"Oh, hi Drake. This is Striker West." And had to remind herself that, despite the fact that she felt like she knew this man, they'd only ever met once. Briefly. "I'm staying with Morien and your dad." Obviously. She felt the need to elucidate. "We met... a while ago now. I work... worked..."

at St Vincent's hospital."

She could almost hear his thoughts. American. St Vincent's.... "Were you the doctor in A&E who showed me where Morien was?"

"Well, I'm not a doctor... but, yes."

There was such a tangible rush of warmth from the other end of the phone that Striker could feel her face flush. "You don't know what you did for us that day. I can't thank you enough...."

"Hey, don't mention it. I'm glad to help. Your sister's... very special to me."

There was another pause. "Is Morien there, by any chance?"

Striker sighed. "I'm sorry, Drake. She was... feeling a little tired. She's already gone up to bed. I'd rather not disturb her."

"No, no, I quite understand," Drake replied. Always the concerned brother. Striker could imagine his forehead creasing like his father's. "And dad?"

"He's upstairs with her. I can get him if you want."

Drake seemed to be choosing his words. She wondered why. "Are... are you the friend that's been helping Morien these last few days?"

"Yeah, I am." Striker smiled. "She mentioned me?"

"Yes, she... mentioned you. Look, maybe you ought to know. I popped round to her flat today - I try and keep an eye on things when she's away...."

"Yes?"

"I went to pick up the new key from Mrs Kantorowicz, do you know her?"

Striker almost felt the echo of a poke in her shoulder. "Old eastern European lady. Yeah, I've met her."

"She's been attacked."

"Attacked? By whom?"

"I don't know. I bumped into someone from victim support at the house. I thought she might have been there for Morien, but then she told me about Mrs Kantorowicz."

"When did this happen?"

"Yesterday lunchtime, apparently. They broke a couple of her fingers, poor love. Terrified, she is. Won't say a word about who did it."

Striker covered her eyes with a hand. "Drake, would Mrs Kantorowicz have this address?"

"Probably. She keeps an eye on Morien, just in case she's... taken ill. She used to be a nurse, see? And Morien does the same for her, you know? I'm sure she's got dad's address." There was a pause. "Are you saying this is connected to what's happened to Morien?"

The stair creaked and Striker looked up to see Sullivan making his way down.

"That's exactly what I'm saying. Drake, thank you for letting me know. Would you like to speak with your father? He's right here."

"She wants to see you," Sullivan said softly, then frowned at the look on Striker's face. He took the phone from her. "Drake? Be'sy'n bod?"³

Striker climbed the stairs two at a time. The bastards had hurt an old lady for information. Admittedly, a cantankerous bitch of an old lady. But if Mrs Kantorowicz hadn't given them the information, would they have gone after Morien's brother, Morien's little nephews...?

But, she wasn't going to tell Morien. Not now.

"Hey," she said, sticking her head round the bedroom door. She didn't need to fake a smile. One came naturally as she saw her friend curled up in bed. She still looked exhausted, but a little colour had returned to her face.

Morien smiled back, feeling awkward. "Who was that on the phone?"

"Your brother." Striker sat herself on the edge of the bed, smoothing the duvet beneath her.

"Oh, you've been Draked have you? Is everything all right? There's nothing wrong is there?" She noticed a little pleat between Striker's eyes.

"No, he was just phoning up to say 'hi', I think." She looked at Morien. Her face was still a little pale, a frail sprinkle of freckles standing out on her cheeks. There were still dark circles like clouds beneath her eyes. "How're you feeling?"

Morien looked awkward again. "I'm fine, really." She picked at an embroidered flower on the duvet.

"What did the doctor say?"

"Not much. I'd been through a stressful situation. I got dizzy. I was tired anyway. So a seizure wasn't really surprising. He's given me a mild sedative. But he was unwilling to change my medication. That's something I'll have to talk about with my GP in London."

"Is that good?"

"I suppose so. I've had problems with medication since the beginning. I was getting horrible side effects with my original drugs. I felt sick all the time, and I'm sure it stopped this from growing properly." She ran her fingers through her hair. "I'm okay with the pills I'm on now. They make me tired, but that's about it. I don't want to have to try something new." There was an edge of desperation in her voice.

"It won't come to that will it? This last week... you've been stressed out, and no one could blame you. Don't tell me this has been normal for you!"

Morien smiled, "No!" And made the mistake of looking directly into Striker's eyes. Her face suddenly creased and the tears came.

"Hey... come on...." Striker reached out, took her hand in hers. "Everything'll be okay. Idomeneo says the police are out looking for them. They'll catch them."

"It's not that...."

"Then what?"

Morien's expression reminded Striker of the little girl in the photograph downstairs. There was a pause, as if Morien was dredging for the words. "I hate having to take pills all the time. I feel like I rattle."

"Isn't it better that you rattle and be able to live a normal life?"

"I wish I didn't have to rattle at all." Another juddering sob. Striker handed her a tissue from the box by the bed. "I hate epilepsy, Striker. I *hate* it. Look at today, I could have got us killed...."

"No!" Striker interrupted so ardently that Morien looked at her in surprise. "If anything, your seizure could have saved our lives. If we'd have carried on running they would have seen us."

"Then I'm just sorry you had to see it." Her voice was so soft Striker had to strain to hear it.

"There's nothing to be sorry for."

"I'm so embarrassed." Morien hid her face in her hands.

Oh, my love.... Striker didn't know what to say. How could she tell her that it didn't matter? The only thing that mattered was that she was all right. But would that be dismissing her feelings? Morien needed to talk about this. So she asked a question instead. "Why?" she said, softly.

Morien sighed through her hands, but didn't speak for a moment. Then, muffled, she said. "I lose control. Of everything. I come out of it and... I don't know what's happened. Except, I'm covered

in drool and sometimes..." Another sob. "Sometimes I've, you know... wet... myself."

"Hey, it's...."

"And I come out of it and everyone always looks so shocked and pitying. And I feel so *helpless*."

There was a silence. Striker could say nothing. She put her hand on Morien's leg, through the duvet, and rubbed gently.

Eventually, Morien took her hands away from her face, replacing them with a tissue.

"How often do you have seizures?"

Morien jumped at the question. "Not often..." Her voice was almost pleading. "Not often. I haven't for a while. The medication seemed to be doing its job, but this week has been...." She shrugged.

There was something in her voice that made Striker pause. This week. Not today, *this week*.... "Morien, at the Boom... was that why you left?"

Morien looked shamefaced. And slowly nodded.

Striker thought. "The lights... and the noise.... You didn't have a seizure, though, did you?"

Morien didn't answer her. She couldn't look Striker in the face.

"Morien?! *Why* didn't you tell me?!" Striker's voice was edged with anger now - a warning rumble of thunder. She grasped Morien's arms tightly... a tightness not quite bordering on punishment. "What happened?"

"It was okay before, when we were just talking. I really enjoyed it. The noise was fine, the lighting was okay. But the lights, when they started flashing... it's like my brain couldn't cope with it. I could feel a fit... coming. I was scared. I didn't want you to see that. I didn't want you to see *me* like that." She took a deep breath and the admission came out in a rush. "I had a seizure in the alley. In the dark." She shivered at the memory.

Striker felt the shiver through her fingertips and rubbed Morien's arms in an unconscious response, but her voice was still hard and hurt. "Did Thomas and... Pully... did they see... did they know?"

Morien shook her head. "They were busy with some people. I... I think Thomas thought I'd fainted. He was very kind."

"Why didn't you call me? Why didn't you *trust* me with this?"

Morien looked her in the eye for the first time. "I thought you... wouldn't want to be with me."

Striker looked astonished. "I would never...."

"Striker, you're the first person - and I mean the very first person - I've told about my epilepsy who hasn't reacted badly to it. All my family have been very supportive, but every one of them was shocked or overly worried or in some kind of denial when they first found out that I was an epileptic. At the very least they didn't know *how* to react. But, you... it just doesn't worry you. I thought it was because you were a doctor, but...." Striker turned her face away.... "Well, *I* was wrong there. But ever since I met you, you've treated me like a normal person instead of a freak or a burden or someone to be pitied or avoided. I mean, look at me, Striker, I'm not normal. I'm Frankenstein's monster. I *can't* live a normal life. Today just proved that."

"Morien...." Striker watched the tears roll down Morien's face, a face twisted in self disgust. She cupped a damp cheek, stroking the tears away with her thumb. "Morien, listen to me. Listen...." Morien finally looked up at her. "Let me tell you something. You are not '*an epileptic*'. You shouldn't label yourself like that. You are a sweet, kind and good woman and a *great* friend... who just happens to have epilepsy. You are not a freak, your life is not over, you are not a burden to your family. I've seen how much your father loves you. How much he treasures you as a human being, and as his daughter, irrespective of neurological disorders, sexuality or... drug-dealing friends." She caught a smile. "Hey... did you know that Lord Byron had epilepsy?" Morien looked surprised. "Did you know Julius Caesar had epilepsy?"

A sniff. "Really?"

"Yeah, so if you want to go conquer Gaul anytime, there shouldn't be problem."

Morien giggled. It was a beautiful sound and made Striker grin inanely. But she let go of Morien's face. "Okay, so epilepsy sucks. But this is just something else that we're going to have to make part of our lives along with... I don't know... paying taxes and watching the Phillies lose...."

"*Our* lives?" Morien looked at her, blinking tears away.

"Yeah. You, your family, your friends... Sophie..." Morien looked away. Striker saw a glimpse of shame on her face. "What?"

"I..." she sighed, "...I haven't told her."

Striker's eyes widened to a glowing blue. "*Your girlfriend* doesn't know you've got epilepsy?"

Morien shook her head.

"Why haven't you told her?"

"Because I don't know how she'll react."

Striker's heart bled for Morien, for the misery she must have been carrying inside her for so long. She wanted to hug her, but she was scared she wouldn't be able to let go. Instead, she did the honourable thing, despite the lump in her throat. "Sweetheart, if she loves you then it won't matter to her. If she loves you she'll be there for you... whatever."

If she loves you like I love you.

Morien nodded, unconvincingly.

There was a silence. A tense, thick silence that was both intoxicating and terrifying. And then Morien spoke. "What about you?"

Striker blinked. Unsure of the answer. Unsure of the question. "What do you mean?"

Morien looked back into the sapphire. "You said 'our' lives."

It was Striker's turn to look away. "I did, didn't I?" Her fingers twisted around each other on her lap. "Well... I hope that... when all this crazy stuff is over... we can still be friends."

"Striker, of course!" Morien reached for her hand. "I can't... I couldn't imagine... us not being friends."

Then she spoilt the sentiment with an enormous yawn.

"Good." Striker smiled, a big grin that lit up the room. This wasn't over. There was more... she knew it. Morien had more to say, but she needed rest more than conversation. The sedative was finally kicking in. "Now shouldn't you be getting some sleep?"

Morien slid down into the bed as Striker pulled the covers over her. "Nag," she said.

Striker grinned even more as she wiped Morien's damp face with a sleeve. "You feeling better?"

"Yes, thank you." The lines round Morien's nose crinkled. Her eyes were feeling heavy. She gave in and closed them.

"You all nice and dry now?"

There should have been fodder for banter in that line, but Morien was too tired to react. So she simply agreed. "Nice and dry."

"Warm enough?"

Morien nodded.

"Want a bedtime story?"

"Mmm, but I don't think I'd last past 'Once upon a time'...."

And she didn't... not quite. Striker thought she had fallen asleep, she was about to get up, when there was a final, drowsy question. "Striker...."

"Mmm?"

"Are those dad's pyjamas?"

Striker looked down at the blue and maroon striped garments, under the loosely tied robe. "Yeah."

"They suit you."

Striker watched as Morien's face relaxed, her breathing evened, gazing down at her in the muted light of the bedside lamp. A thousand thoughts went through her mind. A thousand words that could be whispered into the still room.

For a moment, the nights of reading to the comatose woman were as close as yesterday. Sitting by the bed, it was as if she could still hearing the beeping of the EEG, before the noise drifted into birdsong in the outside evening.

She bent down, a hand paused on the lamp switch, but gave into temptation and touched her lips against the soft cheek. "I love you," she whispered, as quiet as night, and turned the light out.

* * * * *

Striker was starting to feel exhausted herself. In addition to the chase in the rain and the fear of the day, she guessed she still owed herself at least a good ten hours. But she was feeling wired. She needed something... just something to relax her.

She came down into the sitting room and found Sullivan bending over a wooden cabinet. He turned round and held a glass out to her. "You strike me as the kind of person who might appreciate a single malt."

That was what she needed. "Yes. Thank you," Striker said, and took the glass.

Sullivan closed the cabinet door. "You also strike me as the kind of person who'd accompany that single malt with a cigarette. So, shall we step out to the garden?"

They did, Striker with a slight sense of trepidation: Sullivan obviously wanted to talk.

The heavy rain had made the evening cool, although not cold. The sky was still speckled with cloud, but it was light and high and allowed the sinking sun to peek through.

Striker had barely made it into the garden during her stay. It wasn't particularly large, with just a few feet of lawn, shaped in an erratic oval. Flowerbeds dominated, exploding with colour and greenery; a paved path led through the borders to the unknown dark twilight of trees. There was a patio area nearest to the house, with garden furniture surrounded by pot plants. There was a harmony of sweet scents: wet grass, herbs, jasmine climbing up a nearby trellis; and the mysterious, dreamy smell of night-scented stock.

With a spray of raindrops, Sullivan whipped a cover off the bench like a conjuror, and they found comfortable, dry wood beneath them as they sat.

Striker produced her cigarettes and lit one. She saw Sullivan eyeing the packet.

"Um... may I?" he asked. Striker looked at him in astonishment, but nodded, and Sullivan helped himself to a cigarette. "For goodness sake, don't tell my kids," he said, and he leant forward to accept the flame.

The cigarette seemed alien in his fingers. His hands were shaking.

It took a sip or two of malt before either one of them spoke.

"It's extraordinary," Sullivan finally said. "I always thought the most traumatic thing that my family could go through would be losing Gwen... my wife." He took another sip of malt and let it warm his throat; soothe the burning of the smoke. "But I look at what Morien's been through this year..." He shook his head. "What do I do? How can I protect my daughter... my little girl... from this? I don't even know where to begin."

Striker watched her cigarette smoke dissipate into the sunset, unsure of how to answer, even if the question had an answer.

"I just wanted to give them a quiet life, you know? I grew up in the city, but my wife was always a country girl. That's why we settled in Lleudraeth. It's a small town. It's quiet. It has a good school. It has a caring community. And now look at us... Drug dealers, guns... My daughter almost died today. And I can't even say that that's never happened before... or it'll never happen again." He took a big gulp of malt and his shaking hand spilt ash from his cigarette.

Then he continued. "Morien... she can be so headstrong, so determined, you know?" Striker smiled. "But, now she seems so fragile. She never needed protecting, although I've always tried to watch out for her. So has Drake, bless him, even when he was young. You know, Morien was beaten up at school...."

"What?"

"After she came out, you know? She was confronted by a gang of boys. She ended up with a broken rib, a split lip, a black eye, it could have been worse too... much worse. But it was Drake who was more upset, because he felt as if he should have done something. He was thirteen, and a

small thirteen at that. But Morien, she walked right back into school, chin up, black eye glowing, confronted the boys who'd done it, showed them she had nothing to be ashamed of, and the whole lot of them ended up getting expelled. They were bloody lucky not to get arrested."

Striker smiled again, feeling warm with pride and whisky.

"When that happened, I thought that maybe that was going to be the toughest thing she had to go through in her life. Confronting prejudice.... She's always been able to look after herself, and she's always kept an eye on us too. But I've seen such a change in her this year. She's been so low, her self-esteem... She's been so troubled." He shook his head, and took a puff of the cigarette, which was burning down without his help. "She hides it, of course. Seems like she's the old, laughing, joking, sweet Mo. But, it's like she's lost herself..." He paused, and looked sideways at Striker. "That's what I thought, anyway."

Striker looked at him. "What do you mean?"

"You've been good to her. You've been good *for* her."

"She's been good for me."

Sullivan smiled. "I've watched my daughter over the last few months. She's been quiet, pale, far too thin. It's like she's struggling to come to terms with what's happened to her. When the two of you arrived on Saturday, I knew she was in some kind of trouble, and I expected to see her even more pale, even more quiet. And she was tired and concerned... but there was a sparkle in her eyes that I haven't seen for... I haven't *seen*." He didn't continue, just glanced at Striker again. And then, "Today scared me though, Striker. Today scared me badly. But I'm so grateful you were there."

"It scared me too."

"Then you were extremely brave."

Striker shook her head. "I'm not brave. Morien's the bravest person I know."

Sullivan reached down beside him and revealed the bottle of malt. He topped up Striker's glass and then his own. Behind his glasses, his eyes glittered briefly in the light from the house. "Drinking on a school night. It's not often I do this."

"I think tonight you've got an excuse."

"I think tonight I have." He took a sip, and sucked at the remaining stub of his cigarette. His hands were still shaking. "My God, the thought of losing her...."

"I won't let that happen." The words were quiet, resolute and carved in stone in the cool night.

Sullivan looked at Striker. Strange that those steadfast words should come from someone who

suddenly seemed so shy. "What is my daughter to you?" he asked.

Although Striker still didn't look at him, Sullivan couldn't help but notice an eyebrow raise. She couldn't keep the bashful laughter out of her voice. "You sound like you're asking me my intentions."

There was a pause. "Maybe I am."

Now Striker did look at him, blue eyes wide with surprise.

"I might not know you, Striker, but I know love when I see it."

The night was suddenly warmer, whether from the whisky, the cigarette, the towelling robe or the fact that she'd just been caught out. And there was Sullivan, ball in catcher's glove. Her cheeks were blazing, she knew it, and she also knew she couldn't lie.

"Sir... Mr Llewelyn..." she cleared her throat, "...Sullivan..." And then the words came out in a rush, spinning out into the night. "I love your daughter more than anything in the world. And I will protect and treasure her while I still have breath in my body to do it. If she'll let me." She emptied almost the entire glass and almost lost her continued words in its smooth fire. "And if I have the guts to tell her."

She glanced up at Sullivan. He was regarding her. With amusement? With satisfaction? With gratitude? He grinned and held out his tumbler. "Here's to guts," he said.

* * * * *

Striker tiptoed up the creaky stairs, determined not to wake Morien.

Sullivan and she had watched the dusk turn to night, moths tapping at the windows, an owl calling into the lonely dark. And beneath it the gentle wash of the sea as if it was another heartbeat or a breath.

They hadn't talked much more.

But Striker's admission whirled round her mind. The words were out there now, teasing the moths and dancing with moonbeams.

Striker and Morien, sitting in a tree....

So, Sullivan knew, Danny knew, how long before the whole world knew and.... *Oh, Dan, what am I going to do? I think I'm about to fuck up again, bro. Please don't let me fuck this....*

"Striker." She was passing Morien's bedroom, the door ajar, and the words were so quiet that she

barely heard them. She stopped, listening intently.

Nothing. Just the faintest sound of even breaths.

That was the whisky talking.

She closed the bathroom door behind her and concentrating on brushing away the malt and smoke from her teeth. That finished, she peed, flushed, washed and headed out onto the landing again towards her own room.

"Striker." That was louder. She crept to Morien's bedroom door and peeked round. It was quiet and dark in the bedroom. She could see the rounded shape of her friend curled up in the bed. No sound. She turned.... "Striker... don't go."

"You're supposed to be asleep."

"I am asleep... at least... I'm so tired... I can't think straight."

"Do you need anything, honey?"

"Yes." It was a muffled affirmation, spoken into sleep and pillows.

Striker went closer, her eyes becoming accustomed to the dark. "What?"

Morien turned. Her eyes were open. Striker could almost see the green in the shadows. "You... cariad, I need you."

The breath caught in Striker's throat. "What?"

It sounded as if it was an effort for Morien to talk. "Please... Striker... stay with me. I don't want to be... alone."

The words were out, working their magic. Striker didn't even need to think. She closed the door behind her, slipped off the robe and stepped out of the pyjama bottoms. The shirt barely made it past the dark curls between her thighs, but she didn't care any more.

She lifted the duvet and glided along the cool sheet until her body hit Morien's with the softest of collisions. A sweet confusion of limbs as Morien turned, burrowing into Striker's arms, and then the gentle, bittersweet resting of bare skin - a flicker of breath, eyes closed in sleep and wonder.

And need.

There was a creak on the stair. A step on the landing. The squeak of a door. Sullivan going to bed. Water gurgled through pipes; a brief symphony. A light clicked off. Another door closing.

Then stillness dripped in the room.

Morien stirred briefly against her. Striker could just make out her face in the dim light. She looked more like a child than ever.

I will protect and treasure you while I still have breath in my body to do it. Whatever happens between us, you are my love, Morien, you are my life.

Striker lay motionless, letting the cool night move across her heated body. The window was open. The perfume of night-scented stock stole into the room on the sound of the wavering sea. Morien's skin smelt softly of flowers and her slow and even breathing rippled against Striker, igniting fire in her veins.

She was in love. She was alive with it. She was buzzing with it. She wanted to dance with her love on the swell of fragrance, she wanted to shout her love over the harmony of the waves. The feeling took her breath and her heart.

Morien slept.

Chapter 21: *Walk out with me toward the Unknown Region*⁴

She became conscious of the warmth at first. Not the sticky, oppressive warmth of high summer, but the silky and caring warmth of adoration. It seeped into her and made her hum with bliss.

Next, she became aware of scent. It was heady, smoky, part arousal, part sandalwood, part rose.... An intense mixture, yet so subtle she found herself burying herself in the cotton-smooth skin beneath her cheek to catch it.

There was a soft-hard length against her. She felt tangled in it, as if it were ivy. But this ivy supported, and held, but didn't ensnare or imprison.

There was a murmur of cloth against cloth, but her hand was resting on flesh: a velvety dale, secret under the canopy of cotton.

A bare back.

She edged her fingers along a lush path and found a gentle slope upwards, both yielding and firm. And a realisation hit her with the tenderness of a late spring breeze. Striker didn't have any underwear on. And if she didn't have any underwear on, that meant that she was mere inches from somewhere hidden and warm and....

She wasn't sure what was more powerful: the rush of desire, or the humbling sense of gratitude at her friend's trust. And laced with that, the sudden fear of the consequences.

That admitted, she wasn't going to move her hand just yet.

Morien remembered that moment, just a few days ago - a lifetime ago - sitting in Striker's kitchen and the surge of jealousy she had felt as Danny caressed his friend's backside. She smiled - the cat who's got the cream.

Striker was in her bed, half-naked, embracing her with the intimacy and confidence of a long-term partner. And Morien was glorifying in the sensation.

Striker shifted slightly, causing Morien's hand to glide against a dimpled buttock. In the depths of sleep there must have been an awareness, because a gentle noise, somewhere between a growl and a moan, radiated from her. And the ivy of limbs moved so that Morien felt an entreating knee pressing for entrance between her thighs. She opened her legs, cradling Striker's own strong, muscular length.

How had they got here? When had they become everything to each other but lovers?

The moment she had looked into those cyanic eyes and lost herself.

But they weren't going to become lovers.

They weren't.

Despite their current position and the rapid dampening between Morien's legs.

Friends can be physical, Morien told herself. Friends can share a bed. Friends can kiss. Friends can cuddle. Friends can make love....

She thought of Danny again... and wished she hadn't with the rush of jealousy that threatened to overwhelm her.

Morien found herself tightening her hold around Striker's body.

And then she opened her eyes.

*BUWCH SANCTAIDD!*⁵

She was still resting on Striker's shoulder, her lips all but kissing a bare neck, uncovered by the baggy pyjama top. She couldn't see Striker's face above her, but if she looked down....

If she looked down...

The top button of the shirt had worked loose during the night, and as Morien looked down she could see the billows of two large, firm breasts, erect nipples flushed rose-pink....

And she melted.

There was a telling warm stickiness on her thighs. It was a sensation she had actively repressed for months. But now her body rebelled: it gave in to the heat and dissolved. She was liquid. Her mouth watered. She wanted to slide down and make a home in the deep canyon between those breasts. She wanted to nuzzle, she wanted to lick, she wanted to suck....

Suddenly, Striker jolted awake.

Morien swallowed. "You okay?"

Striker's breathing was fast. "Yes, I'm fine. Had a weird dream, that's all."

"Do you want to talk about it?" Morien asked. *If only to help me focus on something other than your body. Or my body.*

"No."

Her dream had been wet and hot. It had been full of guns and fear and thunderstorms, and seizing bodies caked with mud. It had ended with Pully.

Enough said.

And then she became aware of the proximity of Morien's words. She glanced down at wide awake green oceans of eyes, full of light in the curtained room.

She became aware of the slight weight of a hand on her bare backside.

And the position of her leg.... So near and yet so far.

She smiled at her almost lover, her own eyes part teasing part serious. "Do you want me to move?"

In which direction?

"No."

Neither of them wanted to move on... or move back. So they remained where they were, wrapped round each other. Losing themselves.

This, they reasoned: if they didn't move, then maybe they wouldn't have to confront what was waiting for them in the big, bad world. If they didn't move, maybe the whole world would disappear, leaving only the two of them. Just the two of them... that's all they needed.

And if they didn't talk about it... if they didn't think about it... they wouldn't have to acknowledge what this intimacy might mean. *The ostrich response*, Morien thought, *burying your head in the softest skin you can find.* And she did.

"How are you feeling?" Striker finally murmured into the down on Morien's scalp.

"Kay." The response felt like a caress against Striker's neck.

"Still tired?"

"Yes... but good tired."

"We don't have to do anything today."

Morien moved her head slightly, looking up to ask the question. "Idomeneo's coming, isn't he?"

Striker looked down at her. Her eyes twinkled like stars in the morning. "Will he be shocked to find us still in pyjamas?"

Morien smiled as she returned her head to its favourite spot. "I should think that the world will keep turning and the North Wales police will still be able to function."

She felt Striker chuckle against her hair. "I love... I love your accent." She half-wondered what it would be like to hear Morien say her name....

"I love your accent too, stalker. I love your voice. Ever since you read to me... you know?" It felt good to say the 'I' word. *I love you, my friend. I love the feel of your body against mine. I love the way you smell. I love how your eyes change colour with your mood. I love the way you look like a million dollars in tatty shorts and old trainers.*

I love you, R. S. B.

There was no response. Just a warm smile against her scalp.

The house was silent. Sullivan was long gone. They could hear birdsong outside. The sound of seagulls beyond. And the distant, but constant wash of the sea. They could hear their hearts beating.

"Morien...."

"Mmm...?"

"This is nice."

Maybe friends could be physical.

* * * * *

Eventually, they had to get up. The bathroom, the sounds of disagreeing cats, the rumble of stomachs, called them to life.

And they missed the connection immediately.

All they had done was held each other, dozing, occasionally whispering soft, non-committal words. Love wasn't mentioned again.

Time was galloping full-speed towards midday. Morien took advantage of Striker's time in the bathroom to make a phone call. There were questions she still had, that hadn't had a chance to be asked. So she dialled the number. It had barely had time to ring before it was answered; a polite, cultured speaker: "Regeneration Unit."

"Hi, Asha, it's Morien. How's it going?"

"Okay. Danny's out of Intensive Care."

"Already?"

"Already. They're really pleased with him. He's being moved into a different ward this morning."

Morien breathed a sigh of relief. "Striker will be thrilled. Things are going well, then." There was a slight catch at the other end of the line, as if Asha had hitched breathing. "What?"

"Morien, I... I've moved in with my auntie."

"Asha... why?"

"My parents have thrown me out."

Morien's mind raced. "Because of Danny?"

She could hear Asha fighting off tears, but her voice was quiet. She could imagine her, her head down, whispering into the phone, hand to her forehead, avoiding the questioning glances of her gossiping workmates. "Because of Danny. Because I lied to them. Because he's led me astray. Because he's not Hindu. Because he's black...."

"But after everything that's happened...."

"I've brought shame to the family, Morien. I'm just lucky to have a more open-minded auntie."

"Asha...."

There was a moment of silence between them: filled with sorrow and understanding and solidarity.

And then Asha spoke again. "It's weird without you here, Morien. No one knows what's going on."

"So what has been going on?"

"Keith's been suspended. Councillor Mrs Keith's been suspended. All work on the Woodhall Estate project's been stopped because there's an investigation into that. The police have come in and cleared Keith's desk...."

"That must have taken them some time...."

"You're telling me. They were here for days. Donna and Sally were having a lovely time chatting up a couple of detectives. Rumour has it that one policeman even got lost in Keith's Pending Tray. They had to go in after him with a safety line."

That broke the tension.

"Do they honestly think Keith was involved?" Morien was finding it hard to imagine mild-mannered, absent-minded Keith becoming embroiled with violent drug dealers. He had young children, for heaven's sake. His dog was called Buttons. Criminals didn't have dogs called Buttons, did they? But then you didn't expect drug dealers to be called Nigel and Bruce.

Asha's voice was low. "Councillor Mrs Keith... Caroline... rumour has it that, at the very least, she knew exactly what was going on and turned a blind eye. The big question is: did she direct Keith?"

Morien was silent. All that time.... Had Keith known? Worse, had he, directly or indirectly, advised the brothers? Keith had watched as she'd walked into hell and done nothing. No word. No warning. *All that time....*

"Asha," she finally said, "is anything being said about me?"

"All sorts," she could hear Asha's exasperated groan. "You're gossip topic of the month. We've had everything from drug dealers' kidnap victim to gun-toting gangster's moll." Morien didn't know whether to laugh or cry. "Officially, you're still off sick."

"I guess that's as good a lie as any," Morien replied. "Has anyone asked you?"

"You know how it is, Morien. No one notices me. A few - those that remember I'm here and remember that we're friends - they've asked. I just tell them you're one of the good guys."

"Thanks, Asha."

"Nothing to thank me for. It's the truth, isn't it? Besides, I'm just keeping my head down and getting on with my work. The only thing that matters to me now is getting Danny well and

home."

"Sounds like that'll happen soon."

"I hope so." Asha's tone lightened. "How's it going with Striker?" Morien could picture the teasing upturn of her friend's mouth.

"We're fine."

"Still friends?"

She knew her friend's eyes were twinkling.

* * * * *

They were making brunch when the doorbell rang. Morien went to answer it and Striker could hear the rumbling tones from the kitchen. "Check before you open the door, Morien. Did you know it was me?"

Striker came out of the kitchen with a tray of toast and tea, handing Idomeneo a mug. "Still haven't caught up with the bastards then?"

Idomeneo looked her up and down, but didn't reply. He made his own way to the sitting room. Apparently, North Wales Police *could* still function if Striker West stayed in her pyjamas. At least she'd put the trousers back on.

Idomeneo settled himself in an armchair. The women sat on the sofa. They watched as the policeman took a sip of tea, and made himself comfortable. It was like watching a cliff-face settling in for late elevenses. Finally, he spoke. "I had a little chat with a chap at the Met this morning."

Striker had the feeling that the chat might have taken most of the morning. Idomeneo stared into his tea, as if trying to gauge the future from it. Should they tell him it was made from a teabag?

"Yes?" Morien prompted.

Idomeneo finally looked up, glanced from one to the other. "Their names are Nigel and Bruce Toussaint."

"Toussaint? Not Lamprey?"

"Sons of Charles Toussaint."

Striker shook her head. Was that name supposed to mean anything?

"Charlie Toussaint was found guilty of armed robbery, assault with a deadly weapon and manslaughter. He died in prison last year." He paused. "Natural causes."

"So they got pedigree?" Striker asked

"You could say that. Their mother is Gilbert Lamprey's sister."

Morien became aware of the tap-tap-tap of Striker's impatience as she drummed her fingers on the sofa cushion. She was going to start swearing in a minute. So Morien asked the question. "Idomeneo, who is Gilbert Lamprey?"

Idomeneo took another swig of tea and swilled it round his mouth. "Not sure."

Morien felt rather than heard Striker's silent scream.

"But it seems his name's been bouncing around the Met for years. Drugs, guns, interesting business practices...." He pronounced all four syllables in 'interesting', as if he were hopping on verbal stepping stones. "But they've never been able to pin anything on him. Seems Mr Lamprey's a clever man. Many of his associates have been caught, including Charlie Toussaint, but never him. Never enough evidence, see. Somehow he instils great loyalty in those about him... and never gets his own hands dirty."

"But what about the printout Morien had? Surely that proved he's involved at Tumblety Street?"

Idomeneo grinned like a Cheshire cat. "Exactly. Somebody slipped up. And our Morien caught it before they could clear up the mess."

Morien became aware that both Idomeneo and Striker were looking at her, smiling. Stereo pride. She flushed with it. Discreetly, she reached for her would-be lover's hand only to have Idomeneo catch her eye. The tiniest rise of a slate-grey eyebrow, and she flushed even more.

"Okay, so we now know to address these bastards as 'Mr Toussaint' if we meet them in the street, but do you know where they are?"

"No."

Striker almost got up, but was forced to keep sitting by Morien's touch. "What the fuck do you mean 'no'?! This isn't London, Inspector Jones. There's only a limited number of places they could be. This is not a big town...."

"They're not in Lleudraeth." Idomeneo's face was passive, as if Striker's outburst hadn't even scratched the surface. He gulped down another mouthful of tea. "If they were, we would know about it." Striker opened her mouth to speak, but he carried on. "They have been seen. We have leads. We're working on them."

"So what do we do?"

"Nothing."

"Nothing?"

"You stay here."

"So we're stuck in here like caged fucking animals, and they're out there waiting to blow our heads off?"

"Not quite. There are police out looking for them, and the moment they set a foot in Lleudraeth they'll be caught."

"But you're saying we can't move 'til they're caught."

"I'm saying don't go out unnecessarily, and don't go out without an officer knowing where you'll be. Don't get any ideas. Don't go off on any wild goose chases, and *don't* go antagonising the locals." Idomeneo looked her straight in the eye.

So he'd heard about the harbour square.

"Yeah, well some locals need a bit of antagonising." Striker sounded like a sulky teenager.

Idomeneo smiled. "There's a few who need a good kick up the arse. But it's a metaphorical kick, Ms West, and I get to do it, all right?"

Striker couldn't help but smile back. "You're no fun."

Idomeneo finished his tea.

* * * * *

So, they stayed in all day.

They watched a little television - news bulletins still wallowed in the aftermath of the Tumblety Street find. They were falling like dominoes: Caroline Tivison's name was mentioned, but not Keith, Morien was relieved to hear. And a number of other councillors had been questioned.

An interviewee appeared on screen.

"Oh, my God!" said Morien. "What the hell is he supposed to know?"

Wayne Marlow, he was captioned, *Security, East Metropolitan Borough Council.*

"Well, obviously," he was saying, "there was a suspicion of something going on, unannounced visits, irregular working hours, that kind of thing, and we in the security department had raised our concerns, but nothing could ever be proved."

"Oh, please! That man wouldn't know trouble if she came up to him with 'Bad Girl' tattooed on her tits."

Striker glanced over at Morien, lifting an eyebrow. "Now that's an idea..."

"Don't you dare!" Morien shot back, causing the other eyebrow to lift.

But then Striker was diverted. Police had taken the unusual step of naming two men in connection with the crimes. Bruce and Nigel Toussaint. The search for them had transferred to North Wales. They were considered armed and dangerous.

"So, that's what he looked like before you redesigned his nose," Morien murmured.

And then they named Lil' Pully. There he was, a grin as wide as the TV screen, his gold tooth sparkling as brightly as his eyes.

"He was only trying to protect the people he loved," Striker said quietly. "And those bastards had to..." She turned the television off.

They played Scrabble, finding themselves intriguingly matched until, in what Morien called a "dubious" move, Striker added 'left' to 'field' and the board ended up on the floor.

"It is a perfectly acceptable word."

"It doesn't appear in the dictionary."

"That dictionary knows fuck."

"Yes, it does. But it doesn't know leftfield."

Eventually they dressed, and watched the world go by from the perspective of the back garden, playing with the cats.

It led to a question. "I thought you said you had three cats?"

"Do," Morien replied, tickling Heriell's tummy. "There's Snowflower as well."

"Snowflower?"

"Her name makes sense when you see her. She's almost wild. We barely see her during the summer."

"And in the winter?"

"She behaves like visiting royalty. Woe betide any of us if we put a toe wrong."

Sullivan found them lying on their backs on the lawn - Easey using Striker's chest as a pillow, Heriell curled up against Morien's side - watching clouds, high up and indistinct in the blue.

"Good day, daddy?" Morien asked of her upside-down father.

"Well, a little busier than yours," he replied, kneeling down to give his daughter a kiss on the forehead.

"Yeah, well we got an excuse," Striker replied, lighting a cigarette, trying to avoid burning Easey's nose.

"There's police everywhere," Sullivan informed. "There's been police cars parading round town all day."

"Holding a cops' convention, huh?"

"Apparently so."

"Hey, dad." Morien rolled onto her stomach and looked up at him. "Do you think it would be okay for us to go for a walk later?"

"With all those policemen around? I'd be surprised if you couldn't walk to Cardiff in safety."

"Hey, Striker, do you want to go for a walk after supper?"

Striker blew smoke away from Easey, as the little cat stretched on her chest. "We get to eat first?"

* * * * *

Morien prepared chicken pasta and salad. With extra tomatoes.

Striker worshipped her from afar.

Sullivan talked about teaching poetry to fifteen-year-olds as they sat round the kitchen table. "I don't know," he bewailed. "They'll quite happily spend hours discussing pop lyrics of the boy-meets-girl-have-sex kind, but provide them with something half-way meaningful by Dylan Thomas or Ted Hughes or Sylvia Plath and it's all you can do to keep them awake."

"Oh come on, dad. Everyone always loved your classes when I was there, that can't have changed. And I always stayed awake," Morien said.

"True," said Sullivan, his mouth half-turned in a smile, "but you're my daughter and therefore didn't have a choice."

"Besides, you weren't interested in the boy-meets-girl-have-sex stuff," Striker added. Her eyes twinkled as Morien coloured.

Damn she looks cute when she blushes.

"Anyway, you have more intelligence and meaning in your little toe than most kids have in their entire bodies... ever." She took another mouthful of food, and looked up to find Morien staring at her. "What?"

"That's a lovely thing to say."

Striker swallowed, and lost herself in green. There were words tripping in her head. And in her heart. She wanted to say them. The admission to Sullivan the night before.... Was now the right time? Did she dare?

Eventually, she stumbled on a sentence. "You're a great cook, too."

The green glowed. "This from the queen of bacon sandwiches."

What was being said here?

Sullivan glanced from one to the other. He stood up, plate in hand. "I think I might take this into the dining room," he said. "Make a start on some lesson plans."

No one heard him.

* * * * *

They went out not long after, leaving the plates to soak, and Sullivan conducting the London Philharmonic Orchestra with his pen.

There was a police car at the end of the road. Inside, Constable Smith was fast asleep.

Striker knocked on the window. "We're feeling mighty safe here."

Smith jumped and wound down the window. "Good," he said, blinking in the evening light. "Where are you two going?"

"We're claiming our right to freedom as citizens of the human race and going for a walk. Is that okay with the North Wales police?"

Smith glowered at her. "You're not free, you're on bail. Get in." He jerked his head in the direction of the back seat.

"What the fuck do you mean 'get in'?"

"I mean, tell me where you'd like to walk and I'll take you there."

"Well that kinda fucking negates the point of walking, doesn't it?"

"Striker, just get in the car," Morien said, opening the door. "John, how about Clogwyn Bae?"

"Just as long as I don't have to climb it," Smith retorted, and started the engine.

"So, you guys been doing much else other than sitting in your cars all day?" Striker asked as they drew out into the High Street. "Or does everyone want in on the gangsters?"

"Nothin' much else going on," the young constable answered. "Couple of muggings in Penygroes. Kids, by the sound of it. Someone stole a Post Office van in Llithfaen. Nothing much on it, postman had all but finished his deliveries. Car got stolen from the supermarket car park on Heol Coed...."

"So we're the most interesting thing out there, huh?"

"Well, the Toussaints are," Smith replied. He pulled the car into a lay-by. "I'll wait here for you. You know where I am if you need me."

Striker got out of the car. "Yeah, sure, sorry we interrupted your sleep with some work." She turned round.

And looked up.

"It's a fucking mountain!"

"No it isn't, it's barely a hill. Come on," Morien encouraged. "Besides, I want to show you something." Striker grinned at her. "You're incorrigible."

They started up the path that wound its way between grass and rocks. Seabirds wheeled above them, crying into the deep blue.

After a while, Striker spoke. "Can I ask you a personal question?"

Morien stopped to let her long-legged companion catch up. "Another one?" she said, smiling.

Striker seemed to pause to find the words. "You know you said that before you came out you 'experimented'? What did you mean?"

Morien giggled. "Is that all? I meant that when I was fifteen, I went out for a while with Hugh Maddocks. We were quite the item. And he was sweet and respectful and we held hands and cuddled, and he was a very nice kisser as well." She smiled at Striker's surprise. "But that was it. Never wanted to do anything more. I'm a virgin as far as *that* is concerned. Isn't that what you want to know?"

Striker didn't answer. She looked down at her boots.

They started walking again.

"I still hear from Hughie from time to time. He lives in Manchester now. With Davey Miles."

Striker looked round in surprise. "Davey Miles? The kid who proposed to you?"

"I know how to pick them, don't I?"

"Sounds like you have the perfect taste in men... for you. Wish I had been so lucky."

"But you have Danny."

Striker shook her head. "I never had Danny, and he never had me. I guess that's why it worked."

They fell into a breathless silence, continuing their march uphill. Striker glanced back. The police car was still parked in the lay-by. She could imagine Constable Smith, his seat back, his eyes closed, the metal framework vibrating with his snoring. A question came to her unannounced. "Why do you like it so much round here when the people can be so...."

"Rude?" Morien smiled, wondering if Striker was the pot or the kettle. "Let me tell you something. When my mam was ill, when she knew she was dying, she wanted to be at home, not in some hospital. So, my dad took unpaid leave for five months to be with her... and us. There was no money coming in. The little they had saved up just went on her care. They got a little in benefits, and our grandparents gave us all they could, but there was a mortgage to pay, bills to pay... there would be days when dad could barely afford to feed us."

She paused for a moment as they continued to make their way up the steep slope. She reached out a hand, pulling Striker up over a rocky incline. As fleet as a fairy in a flower meadow, Striker thought as she reluctantly let Morien's hand slip from her grasp.

Fairies? If you believe in fairies clap your hands.

Right on Tinkerbell, gimme five.

"Anyway, there'd be days like that when there'd be a knock on the door and it would be Mrs

Probert from up the road. She'd made far too much casserole and would we like some? Then there'd be Mrs Price from round the corner who'd turn up with a loaf of freshly-baked bread. Mrs Jenkins from next door would bake us cakes. Mr Maguire would give us vegetables from his allotment. We never asked for it... they just came. And more... there was always someone to see us to school, pick us up, take Drake to his music lessons, take me to my art class - even pay for them if need be... or to stay with mam when dad took us out. Old Mrs Morgan even took us to the cinema in Pwllheli a couple of times, paid the bus fare and everything - though I think she just wanted an excuse to go and see some Disney films."

They were almost at the top of the hill. Morien looked back at Striker, just a few steps behind her. "So, they may be damn rude, they may be a little too jingoistic at times and like any section of society you have your prejudiced, arsehole minority, but the majority are good-hearted, caring people. And we look out for each other. Then, of course, there's this...."

And Striker reached the top of the hill. "Oh my God!"

Before her stretched the world.

On one side, Lleuadaeth stretched at her feet like a cat in the sun - its head in the cool shadow of the hills, its tail gently brushing the white sands of the beach. All around, the setting sun danced across the land, teasing cloud shadows across green uplands, bathing grazing flocks in the glow of evening. On the other - and the other left her stunned - was the sea. They were at the top of a cliff, short, wind-stunted grass prickled their ankles. The beach lay below them, the tide tickling the shore with a feather-white touch, and beyond that the deep, blue-green of the Irish Sea. The sun turned each wave crest into burning gold, so from the cliff-top it looked as if the sky was trying to net the mysteries in the ocean's depths. And the sky itself melted from the velvet blue of oncoming night into the soft peach of day's end, as the sun lowered itself into the water.

They stood without a sound, listening to the wind telling stories, listening to the little town purr beneath them, the waves caressing the long curve of beach, and the sky sing with seagulls above. And throughout everything, they heard the timeless rush of tide, both inside and out, as if their blood was ocean.

But more and more, Striker found her attention drawn not to the sea or the sky or the land, but the face of the woman in front of her. Morien stood near the edge of the cliff, her skin glowing with the colours of evening, the breeze blowing the short lengths of auburn hair back from her face, against the blue of her headscarf. She stood as if she was a queen surveying her realm, familiar and comfortable with everything she regarded. This was her land, her ocean, her life - and she was alive with it.

"I wanted to show you this," she said, her voice lilting above the wind and the waves. She turned slightly, gifting Striker with the perfect profile.

"You're so beautiful." Striker said it so quietly she thought only the wind would hear, but slowly Morien turned her face towards her.

"What did you say?" Her voice was as quiet as Striker's had been, but suddenly it was if the sounds of words didn't matter any more... only their meaning. She caught Striker's gaze, becoming lost in their intensity. The blue was shining so brightly it was like silver... or the Welsh gold of the waves.

There was magic here. All her life Striker had wanted to believe in it: had read about it, dreamed about it, but had always inhabited a world that was made up of harsh, emotional, sometimes violent reality. But now, here at the top of this hillside, with the incantations of the wind and the waves in her ears, she was suddenly able of truly believing.

And she stepped into the unknown region.

"You're beautiful... so beautiful," she repeated, incapable now of saying anything but what was in her heart.

The words stole Morien's breath away.

Striker moved closer. It was as if she no longer had a choice of what she could say, what she shouldn't. She raised her hand, almost despite herself, and rested it on Morien's cheek. "Do you know what you are to me?"

Morien looked puzzled, almost scared. She looked up into Striker's eyes, eyes that reflected the sky and the sea. "You think I'm beautiful?"

"I think you're more beautiful than anything."

"Don't be silly...." She looked away.

"Hey, I mean it." She brushed her thumb against soft skin, revelling in the way it made her own skin tingle; in the art of the sunset, like stained glass on Morien's face; in the play of the wind. "All the things that have happened to you. All the torment we've been through over the last few days. Sweetheart, I wish... I wish I could take it all away."

"But you do," Morien broke in. It seemed a time for confessions. *Forgive me, mother, for I am about to sin.* "Striker... when I'm with you, I forget everything. The pain, the fear of it all." Now she reached up to brush a lock of hair from Striker's face. She ran her fingers through Striker's long, loose hair, loving the way the light shimmered blues and coppers across the dark mane. "I forget myself... I forget my name... I forget to breathe...."

"Don't do that," Striker whispered, and kissed her.

They lingered, warm and soft.

It was a simple question asked by caress, which was answered with another question. Neither of them tried to deepen the kiss, needing simply the feel of satin beneath their mouths, and the lazy, silken flow of blood through their veins. It was enough for Striker to rest her hand on Morien's

cheek and for Morien to keep her fingers tangled in Striker's hair. It was enough to acknowledge that this was something more than simple friendship. It was enough... for this moment. So they lingered.

Slowly, slowly, Striker peeled her lips away, the loss of connection almost painful, opening her eyes to the sight of Morien, heavy-lidded and blinking in the sunset. A lovely smile dawned on her face and her eyes sparkled like the waves behind them.

Striker moved to kiss her again, but Morien looked down and then glanced at Striker sideways. She looked shy. "Can I ask you something?"

"Of course."

"Why did you tell me you didn't want to... sleep with me?"

Striker looked puzzled for a moment. "When did I say that?"

"At the Boom Shack...."

Striker's forehead smoothed and she grinned - a sweet, shy, one-sided grin that made Morien's knees go weak. "Oh, then," she said. She ran her finger down Morien's peach-skin cheek, coming to rest on her chin. She looked into those ocean eyes, the eyes that had captured her from the start. "If I recall, my exact words were that I didn't want to fuck you," she said, with a smile. "I don't want to fuck you. I could never fuck you, of all people." She watched a tear follow the path her finger had just taken, then gently wiped it away with her thumb. "Morien, I want to make beautiful, sweet love with you... slow, sensual, beautiful love until... there's condensation dripping down the windows and... and the neighbours are calling the police."

"Striker West...," Morien breathed the name. Then: "You do have a way with words, don't you?"

Striker ran her hands down Morien's body, dallying as her palms brushed the sides of Morien's breasts, and then down, settling on a pert backside. She squeezed, gently, and whispered at a shell-like ear, "I gotta way with more than words, baby."

Morien threw her head back and laughed, only to stifle herself with a groan as a hot mouth found an earlobe and nipped. She curled her arms round Striker's neck, encouraging the contact as the American's tongue kissed then licked skin, a growl vibrating. Words rose like music. "Striker," she said, whispering into her hair. "Oh, Striker...."

Striker stopped, her eyes closed, her mouth still resting against Morien's neck. The sound of her name, spoken in rippling Welsh cadence, rushed through her body, feeling for one incredible moment, like the first swell of orgasm.

She lifted up, off Morien, her hands resting on the smaller woman's shoulders, needing the support as she felt her legs weaken. Morien's eyes were wide, a deep, dizzying moss that threatened to swallow her whole.

"God help me," she murmured, her heart pounding. And then she couldn't wait any more. She dived, claiming Morien's mouth with her own. Her tongue, still tingling with the taste of skin, ran against the curve of lips with pious desperation.

And Morien let her in.

The first, slick tangle of tongue against tongue caused both of them to moan. Morien felt herself sinking into the kiss. Sinking and floating at the same time. This was a sensuous heaven. She could taste smoke and the lingering tang of chicken pasta and something indefinably Striker that made her want to plunge deeper for more. And something else, as if... as if love had a taste. Slowly, she traced her tongue along Striker's, relishing it - hard and soft at the same time. A little hum of delight emanated from the taller woman pressed against her and translated itself into liquid below. So she snaked her tongue the other way, which elicited the same reaction.

A dialogue was emerging between them of little whimpers of arousal, narrated by the sleek caress of hands. Morien once again found her fingers in Striker's hair wanting to draw her in closer. Her other hand slipped downwards, feeling the strong muscles of Striker's shoulders and back shifting beneath the material of her t-shirt. She found herself involuntarily tracing patterns along the flow of muscle, little circles and waves, her fingers mimicking the movement of her tongue.

Striker was finding she couldn't get enough. She hugged Morien closer to her body, feeling the smaller woman's breasts pressing sweetly-hard against her abdomen. She moved a hand down to tease the side of the right mound, gently kneading it with a thumb. Her other hand ventured lower, sliding gently but firmly over Morien's bottom. Here it stayed, massaging a buttock which, in turn, pressed its enthusiasm into her palm.

She wanted to say something, but she couldn't tear her mouth away. So she poured everything into the kiss, telling Morien how amazing she tasted, how incredible she was, how aroused she was making her. Her centre was molten, yet she could feel her clitoris unbearably hard, a swollen island in the flood of heat.

Striker moved a leg, insinuating it between two smaller thighs. The motion caused her to rub against the hard seam of her jeans and she groaned again into Morien's mouth. Morien was hot. She could feel the heat through the denim. She shifted her leg again, barely a rub against Morien's inner thigh and then the small woman pushed forward, rubbing herself, her own dampening centre, against Striker's leg. The move was accompanied by a sweet, sighing groan that Striker breathed in like oxygen.

Some still-functioning part of Striker's brain wondered. Was she going to come just from a kiss?

Again a push, again that groan, a breathy gasp in her mouth....

And then Morien stopped.

Everything.

Morien felt "Wh...?" tickle against her lips.

She put her hands on Striker's shoulders and pushed her back. "I'm sorry," she said, trying to still her heart, trying to sound calm, controlled, trying to find the breath to say the words, "we can't do this." She started to move away although it felt as if she was tearing her skin apart.

Striker stared at her, her breath coming in short gasps. Every nerve ending was tingling in frustration. She couldn't speak, simply taking in the woman in front of her: those bruised, full lips, her flushed skin, the green eyes, now so dark with dilation they looked almost black. But there was fear there. Morien shut her eyes. Striker spun away, reeling, trying to get her bearings.

She stopped barely a safe distance from the cliff edge, taking great gulps of sea air. The sea gulls cried. The sound ripped her inside to shreds. She took another breath.

Of course they couldn't do this. What the hell had she been thinking?

She turned round.

Morien was standing a few steps away, looking away. One arm wrapped round her body, the other to her face.

"You're right," Striker said, but even to herself her voice sounded half-hearted.

Morien took her hand away from her face, looking round at Striker. She was crying. She needed an out, they both needed an out, and Striker loved Morien enough to give her one. But it was going to hurt like hell.

Striker smiled encouragingly, but it didn't reach her eyes. "Morien, I'm a lot of things: a smoker, a drinker, I've taken a few illegal substances... I'm not exactly celibate... I'm a stalker..." a grim laugh reached Morien's ears, "I've fucked up a lot of things in my life, but I'm not about to let you fuck up your life. I've broken up people's relationships in the past, but I can't let you do the same. You're a good, beautiful person. You have a girlfriend, and you love her, and, you're right, we can't do this."

Sophie.

Yes, that was a good excuse.

And, suddenly, Morien closed her eyes again, her stomach lurching from the weight of guilt at what she'd been thinking. Sophie wasn't an excuse. She was her girlfriend.

But, the world she was now inhabiting had no place for Sophie. It was a world of fantasy and intrigue and danger that started and ended with Striker, and all others had become supporting players. But this was no fantasy world, and those bit-players were real people, living, breathing

and feeling, and suddenly it was as if Sophie was there, her presence as tangible as if she had materialised in front of them.

"I'm sorry," Morien said, unsure of whether she was apologising to Sophie or Striker. She couldn't have met the eyes of either one.

"So am I," Striker said.

"You know, for a bad girl, you're doing a really bad job."

"I told you, I don't like being labelled." Striker's voice was heavy with melancholy. "Maybe we ought to go home, huh?"

Morien nodded.

Striker wanted to hold her hand out, but instead, shoved it into her pocket.

She took one look back at the sunset. The sun was almost touching the waves. Would it fizzle out and die in a cloud of smoke? She turned back and followed Morien down the hill in silence.

* * * * *

"Have you two had an argument?" Sullivan asked his daughter, discreetly, as she sat staring at the television. She had no idea what she was watching. The action was taking place in her head, on a cliff top, with the sea as background.

Morien looked up, barely aware that Sullivan had spoken. "Not exactly," she finally said, her voice dull.

Sullivan looked at her, concerned. "Are you all right, cariad?"

Morien shrugged. She could smell Striker's cigarette smoke entwined with night-scented stock, drifting in on the slight breeze through the open patio doors. It was as heady as her kisses and it made Morien feel giddy and frustrated. She had been sitting on her hands all evening. "I'm just tired," she said. "It's been a weird few days." Sullivan gave a hollow laugh. "I think I might go up to bed."

She stood to go, but hesitated, wondering whether she dared stick her head around the door to wish Striker a good night. But that would involve looking her in the eyes while trying to stop her knees from buckling. She started to move but was stopped by a noise behind her. Looking round she caught Striker's arctic sky gaze as the tall woman appeared at the door. She shivered imperceptibly, despite her body flushing with sudden heat. Both women looked away.

"Mr Llewelyn, would it be all right if I made a phone call?" Striker said, concentrating her

attention on Sullivan.

"Of course you can," Sullivan replied. "And please call me...."

"...Sullivan," Striker finished and smiled at him.

Morien sighed deeply, and moved to the hallway, aware that Striker was following her. She started up the stairs.

"Morien..." the voice caught her. Morien turned, attempting to keep her expression calm. She could see Striker swallow, the muscles working in her throat. There was a pause. "Good night," Striker said, at last.

"Good night," Morien replied, managing a smile. She turned back up the stairs, resisting the urge to run, sensing Striker fall onto the chair by the telephone. She shut her bedroom door behind her.

Striker heard the door click shut, and put a hand to her face, massaging her forehead. *This is a fucking mess.*

She needed familiarity. She needed reassurance. She needed Danny.

She unfolded the piece of paper that Morien had pressed into her hand, with a grin and sparkling green, after her own call to Asha. Striker didn't take in the number immediately, merely running her gaze over the rich handwriting and Morien's doodling. She'd illuminated the D of Danny with carefully penned dreadlocks.

This is a fucking mess.

They'd been driven home, PC Smith apparently oblivious to the uncomfortable silence between them. Striker had headed straight for the shower. Standing in the lukewarm water until the need for release became too great. She'd come hard, leaning against the tiled wall, biting her bottom lip to mute her cry.

And it hadn't made the slightest bit of difference.

Striker sighed heavily, and picked up the phone, dialling the number. It rang for a while, and Striker was becoming painfully aware of just how late it was in the world of St Vincent's, when a sleepy voice answered.

She smiled the moment she heard it. "So, you busy chatting up the nurses, bro?"

"Nah, sis, Asha won't let me."

There was a pause. The sheer joy of hearing Danny's voice made Striker's throat burn with tears. He sounded slow and tired, but it was aural cinnamon. "Shit, bro I was so scared."

"I'm okay, sis. Had to shave me dreads off, though."

"Oh Dan...." Striker almost choked. "How're you doin'?"

"My head hurts like fuck sometimes. Other than that, the drugs are cool, the nurses are pretty, and me girl is sweet."

Striker laughed. Typical Danny: have his life threatened, undergo emergency surgery and still be so laid back he's almost upside down.

"Do you remember what happened?"

She could hear Danny sigh. "Nah. Just remember something big and white came through the door and had me down on my knees before I could see anything. They were asking me questions about you and your friend and some bag and I didn't understand a fucking thing they were saying."

Striker slumped. "I'm sorry this has happened to you, Danny."

"Not your fault, sis." There was a long pause, then: "Striker, have you heard about Pully?"

Not the time, or the phone bill. "Yeah, I heard about him. You seen Thomas?"

"Yeah. He came to see me."

"How is he?"

"Sad. Lotta bad things in the world, Strike."

"I know, bro, I know."

There was a long silence. Striker wrestled to keep her voice under control. To keep herself from sinking into slough of guilt. "Is Asha looking after you?"

She could sense Danny's smile - contagious, as always. "Yeah, she's great. Her parents don't like me."

"What the fuck do they know?"

Danny chuckled. "I miss having my big, bad sister around. Asha said you were in *Wales*." He said it as if it was down a byroad from nowhere.

"Yeah. I'm with... Morien." She was aware of the catch in her voice, but Danny didn't seem to notice.

"Hiding out?"

"That was the plan."

"How's it going?"

"Okay. It's quiet." Apart from the gangsters. "Beer's good. Cats everywhere. Her dad's cool."

"How's it going with Morien?"

Striker hesitated.

"Strike?"

Striker sighed.

"You're not a fuck-up, sis."

"No, but I'm going to be. One way or other."

"Wanna talk about it?"

"You got your own problems, bro. You don't need mine too."

"Yeah, but I'll feel better if you do."

Striker could almost feel the words crawling out of her mouth. "Danny... I want her so badly it hurts."

"You *still* haven't...?"

"The most we've done is kissed." A pause. Striker's voice became breathless and deep. "*Fuck, can she kiss.*"

"Doesn't she want more than that?"

"I don't know. Dan, she's got a girlfriend already..."

"Well, that hasn't stopped you before." A pause. Danny obviously realised that wasn't what Striker needed to hear. This time it was different. He tried again. "She's made a commitment to this other woman?"

"I hope not."

"But that's what's holding her back?"

"Yes... No. No, it's not just Morien. It's me. I'm holding us back."

"Why, sis?"

"Cos I'm scared." She took a deep breath. "Dan... bro... if I love her... I'll lose her."

Chapter 22: O Taste And See⁶

It was a hot night.

Cool air flowed through the open window, but it did nothing to cool Striker's flushed skin. She kicked back the duvet again, and again felt a rush of heat as she remembered the feeling of Morien's lips on hers, Morien's tongue against hers, Morien's body thrusting....

If she removed anything else she would be naked, and her sanity couldn't afford her being naked right now.

Already she had tried to read, to allow her mind to be guided down paths that did not end in Morien. Except every path ended in Morien, and she would find herself imagining Galadriel and Olwen and (heaven help her) Hermione Granger with the open, child-like face of a pretty Welsh woman.

Already her fingers had wandered down between her legs, to explore the dripping core that seemed to be governing her every waking thought. She had brought herself to a panting climax, muffling the name of her would-be lover in her pillow. It had only made her feel more wet, more fuelled and more frustrated.

And she knew why. It wasn't her pleasure she wanted. For the first time in her sex life, she craved someone else's pleasure more than her own. She wanted to feel Morien writhing under her. She wanted to lick the sweat off her skin. She ached to hear her name on Morien's tongue, cried out in release. She longed to....

She wondered if she would wake the whole house if she had a cold shower. She wondered if she could stand lying in this bed any longer.

Fact is, if she stayed in this bedroom she would either start running up the walls or she would explode with lust. Either way, she was going to wake the whole house. She would risk a trip down the creaking stairs to the kitchen, a glass of cold water and a change of scenery.

In the dim light from the window, she pulled on some boxers and opened her bedroom door. The house was in darkness. Both bedroom doors were shut to the landing. She took a step out and thanked the god of floorboards for staying quiet. She felt her way down the soft carpet of the staircase, pausing at every muted, wooden squeak for signs of life. Nothing, not even the curious

blink of feline eyes in the dark. She reached the hall and padded her way towards the half-open door of the kitchen.

And stood stock still on the threshold.

Morien was already there. She was silhouetted against the glass of the back door. The faintest glimmer of moonglow made her auburn hair gleam like a halo. Striker imagined she looked flushed. Her skin glistened. In her hand she held a glass of water. Ice cubes clinked faintly as she rolled the glass against her upper chest.

Striker felt frozen by the vision. Her eyes were growing accustomed to the dark, and shades of Morien seemed to materialise within her silhouette. Striker felt as if she was spying on something as fragile as myth, as if it were a unicorn or a spirit that had just revealed itself in the moonlight. Morien was wearing those striped pink pyjamas but the buttons at the collar were undone, displaying a tantalising expanse of skin that began to swell as it disappeared under the material. The glass rolled again. A bead of liquid, maybe condensation, maybe perspiration, lingered on the revealed flesh, before trickling down to disappear beneath the shirt.

It was all Striker could do to stop herself from dashing forward and following the liquid with her tongue. She found herself clutching the doorframe for support, and the sudden movement caught Morien's attention. Her eyes were wide and dark. There was fear in them. And sadness. And deep, deep desire. For a long moment they simply stared at each other.

Striker started to move forward, but Morien turned, her words half whispered, further muffled by a hand. "I can't deal with this."

Striker stopped. This couldn't go on. She had to make a decision for both of them. Her voice was quiet and fast. "This is crazy.... Morien... I can't pretend that I'm not attracted to you. I can't do it. So... I think it's best that I leave, okay? First thing in the morning." Morien's eyes widened. "I'll go back to London, go stay with...." Except for the life of her she couldn't think of anyone who she could stay with whose position she wouldn't compromise, or whose life she wouldn't put at risk. She waved her hesitation away. "I'll find somewhere to stay...." She turned to go.

"No!" Morien moved forward now, abandoning the glass on the table. "No, Striker. Please, don't leave. Please." She reached out to catch Striker's arm, and with the touch, Striker's pulse quickened almost unbearably.

Striker wondered if she could control herself, but it was Morien who forced her backwards. It was Morien who slipped an arm round the tall woman's shoulders and pulled her face down. It was Morien who sighed a sweet, simple apology against Striker's mouth, and then claimed her lips with her own.

The kiss was hard, bruising and returned with fire. Tongues, hands, bodies melted together until they weren't sure where one finished and the other started. And didn't care. Morien found herself turned and pushed backwards against one of the kitchen surfaces, the edge hard against the small of her back. The sudden pain was glorious, making her gasp and cling to Striker's body still more

tightly. She could feel Striker's big hands sliding down her sides, leaving a trail of tingling nerves, and arriving at her backside. They squeezed, slowly, causing a rush of flame to her groin.

The need for air forced them apart, but Striker took the opportunity to lift Morien up, so she was sitting on the kitchen surface. Taking advantage of the change in height, the taller woman started to explore the span of Morien's exposed flesh in front of her. She held Morien gently, her hands at the small waist, her mouth relishing its journey. She kissed the skin, moth-like touches which made Morien's blood flutter, then gently licked, relishing the slightest saltiness. A groan vibrated against her lips which encouraged her fingers to venture under the pyjama top, wandering up the smooth plain of the smaller woman's stomach. Striker's hands stopped just below Morien's breasts, lingering.

Morien felt words against her skin, drifting up in a kind of sensual haze. "I've wanted this for so long." Palms were warm against her abdomen, sending hot electricity through her body. "I've dreamed about this." Fingers touched the underside of her breasts. "Touching you. Kissing you..." A kiss in the shadowy valley that disappeared beneath the material. "Morien..." Her name branded on her skin with the heat from Striker's mouth. And then thumbs reached up and brushed against erect nipples, and Morien cried out.

Striker lifted her head and again their lips met, this time slower and infinitely more sensual, their tongues almost lazy in their venturing. She could feel Morien's fingers in her hair, as if the smaller woman was trying to merge with her. Striker went willingly, exulting in the softness of Morien's lips moving across her own, and the blissful, liquid heat between her legs. She reached up to fully cup a pert breast, testing the firm weight of it, enjoying its softness and size, dancing her thumb around the velvet aureole. The other hand roamed downwards, playing with the waistband of the pyjamas. Fingers slipped further and Morien gasped into her mouth...

...then broke away, her hands stopping Striker's in their tracks.

Striker swallowed her own frustrated cry. "*Morien...?!*" she said, half-question, half-exclamation. Her hands still clung to Morien's body, desperate for the connection.

"Striker, don't..." Morien's voice was so full of tension it was almost biting.

"Don't fuck around with this. *Please*." Morien could feel Striker trembling against her. "If it's something I've done... tell me. Please tell me. But I can't... deal with this... without knowing." Striker looked up at Morien, her eyes entreating.

Morien was as taut as a bowstring. One pluck and she'd be gone. Striker's shaking hands on her bare midriff was almost unbearable. She had to tell her.

"Striker, it's not you. It's me. I can't."

"Why?"

Morien could see Striker suck her bottom lip into her mouth, biting down. She wanted to be

those teeth. And she was terrified.

"Please... is it... Sophie?"

Morien found herself brushing Striker's dark locks away from her face, despite herself. It was a gesture of comfort and reassurance for both of them.

"No, cariad, it's not Sophie. Although maybe it should be." That thought was for another time. "Striker... I'm scared."

"You're scared?" Striker's hands lost some of their tension. Thumbs stroked the skin. "Why?"

Morien looked shamefaced. "I'm sorry... I want this... I want *you* so badly... but..." She met Striker's concerned gaze and then it all came out in a rush. "I haven't had sex since this happened..." She brushed a hand over her head. "I haven't even touched myself that way. I can't. Ever since I was diagnosed..."

"The epilepsy?"

Morien nodded.

"But just because you have epilepsy, it doesn't mean you can't have sex."

"I know... but I'm so scared."

"Why are you scared?"

Morien looked miserable, her face downcast, her fingers now worrying a tangle into Striker's hair.

Striker's fingers made encouraging circles at Morien's waist. Her voice was as gentle as midsummer. "Please, Morien. Tell me. Why are you scared?"

"Because I don't know what effect it'll have on me. If I..."

"When you come."

"Yes."

The fingers stopped their movement, simply resting on skin. "You're scared that it might trigger a seizure?"

Morien nodded.

Striker let out the breath that she hadn't realised she'd been holding. She moved her hands up to Morien's face, cupping her cheeks, lifting her eyes to hers, wanting to kiss her lips again,

wanting to kiss away the tears that had appeared in Morien's green gaze. "Those bastards have a hell of a lot to answer for, don't they?"

Morien nodded again and rested her forehead against Striker's, her eyes closed.

"I'm sorry, Striker. I guess *I'm* the fuck-up."

Striker almost laughed. "No you're not, you're a princess. You're my princess. And I really want to make love with you."

"Striker..." Morien tensed under her hands.

Striker moved her hands down again, so they teased the pyjama waistband. "I want to touch you, and taste you. I want to make you come."

Morien shivered. She whispered against Striker's lips. "I don't want to live like this anymore. I don't want to be afraid of my body anymore. Help me."

"I want to help you." Her mouth brushed against Morien's with the words.

There was a pause as their breath mingled, heavy and slow with expectation.

"But if..."

Striker caressed a soft cheek. "If... *if*... you have a seizure, then I will be here. I will look after you, and hold you, and protect you, and I will be here when you open your eyes. Nothing will change that."

Blue met green in the dark.

"Striker, touch me," she whispered.

"Morien, are you sure?"

"Be my knight."

Striker's fingers restarted their journey downwards, moving under the waistband of the pyjamas, slowly, slowly touching the skin. Striker watched Morien's eyes flutter shut. Her breathing was coming quick and warm against Striker's face. She could feel Morien's skin trembling beneath her fingers.

So aroused. So scared.

Striker wanted to relax her, assure her that they would make this work, and this was not the place to do it. But first, she allowed herself just a little treat... just a little taste of what was to come. A wandering finger felt its way to the curls between Morien's thighs, and dipped... just dipped into

the moisture there. Morien jumped at the contact, but that was all it was. Drawing the finger out Striker slipped it between her lips. And sucked.

Morien opened her eyes to see her own essence glinting in the half-light on those full lips and Striker's ice blue gaze quiver shut. When she opened them again, her eyes had turned, as if by magic, a deep violet. She leaned forward and kissed Morien gently, sliding her tongue into her mouth so Morien could taste herself.

Morien felt strong arms encircle her, felt Striker's murmur against her lips, "Put your legs round me." She did, pulling Striker towards her, wanting to rub her damp centre against Striker's torso, but simultaneously terrified of her body's responses to that action. Muscles suddenly flexed under her fingers and Morien felt herself lifting off the kitchen surface. Her eyes widened. Words were moist and breathy in her ear. "Hold on, baby. We're going to take you somewhere comfortable."

Morien nestled her cheek against Striker's neck, closing her eyes. This was the bolt-hole she'd found less than twenty four hours ago: the balmy scent of rose and sandalwood and smoke that lingered on Striker's skin. "You smell like heaven," she murmured, then brushed the flesh with her lips. Striker made a whimpering noise, so Morien did it again, this time following up with her teeth and tongue.

Striker's grip around the smaller woman tightened, and she paused in the hallway for a moment, letting out a breath. She could feel Morien's arousal against her, hot and wet, and beginning to seep through material. She could feel a maddening desperation to feel that trickle in her mouth. That brief taste had not been enough. It would never be enough. Her arms were shaking, not with Morien's slight weight, but with the strain of holding herself back. She briefly wondered what Sullivan's reaction would be if he discovered them rutting like teenagers on his hallway carpet. The thought was enough incentive to get her upstairs, where she pushed on Morien's bedroom door and brought them to a halt inside.

By the bed.

Morien slipped out of the circle of Striker's arms and loosened the grasp on her shoulders. She was suddenly a stranger in her own bedroom and she felt at a loss for what to do next. She looked up at Striker. The tall woman's face was hidden in the dark of the room, but her words guided her. "Make yourself comfortable," she said, quietly. She could hear a smile in the voice.

And the bedside lamp burst to life.

Striker's eyes were dark with want, but warmth and reassurance and something like concern danced in there as well. She lifted an eyebrow, and Morien found herself sitting on the bed, clutching the dishevelled duvet nervously. "This is stupid," she said, her quiet voice shaking. "I feel like this is my first time."

Striker sat down beside her, taking her hand in her own. "It is the first time... for both of us." Striker's hand was trembling. Morien was about to speak, but Striker stopped her words with a

sweet, lingering kiss that did nothing more than promise. Her hands went to the hem of Morien's pyjama top, and her eyes asked a question.

Morien nodded - a quick, tense nod before she lost her nerve - and raised her arms. Striker slowly, carefully moved her hands up Morien's body, bringing the material with her, lifting the shirt off. She tossed it away, hands hardly losing contact with bare skin. Without stopping to concentrate on what was being revealed, her touch moved down, hooking her thumbs onto the waistband. Again, her eyes questioned.

Morien stood, allowing Striker to sweep the pyjamas downwards, then stepped aside from the pool of fabric. She stood naked in front of the American woman, feeling excited, vulnerable and terrified at the same time.

Striker, her eyes closed with blissful anticipation, inhaled the scent of Morien's arousal. Her mouth watered.

This was it. This was what she'd been dreaming about for months. This was what she'd been searching for... for years. Real, honest-to-goodness love. The kind that comes just before *happily ever after*. Had she come to Britain for this?

Maybe... just maybe....

She opened her eyes.

And let out a breath. Pale, ethereal, fragile... real. "You're so beautiful," she said.

Morien looked down.

"Hey." Striker stood up, catching Morien's face with a tender hand. "You are. Ever since I first saw you, Morien, you're like something...." For a moment she was lost for words. "You're like something from a story. You are my princess. My magical...." a kiss, "...beautiful...." another kiss, "...princess." And Morien caught the words and swallowed them, diving into Striker's mouth, pressing her naked body against the soft material of her t-shirt. Swollen nubs rasped against the fabric, feeling the answering peaked rigidity from beneath as she reached up. She started to pull the shirt up, suddenly desperate to feel the skin below, but Striker stopped her. Roaming hands persuaded her onto the bed, and she found herself staring up into a deep blue longing that made her breath catch.

"Lie down, baby." Striker's voice was low and deep and breathless at her ear.

She did, wondering how she could feel so apprehensive and aroused at the same time. Striker settled at her side, her clothed body pressed up against hers. For a moment, she did nothing, and Morien could feel her ardent, appreciative gaze melting her body. Then a hand landed, touching a breast, running a finger around the soft flesh. Morien could feel her body respond to just this gentle contact, flushing with heat.

Then the voice again, itself enough to make her blood quicken. "It's in your eyes, that beauty. When I first saw you, it didn't matter where we were, what had happened, there was that beauty. You glow with it."

Striker propped herself up on one arm, so she could look down at her lover. *Lover*. God, the mere word made her hot. The closest hand caressed the back of Morien's neck, simply teasing the longer strands of auburn. The other now cupped the breast, squeezing gently. A thumb drifted over the sensitive tip and Morien gave a soft cry.

Striker's voice caught in her throat, but she carried on talking, her own desire telling in the sound. "I've wondered what you sound like when you're aroused. I've wanted to hear you cry out at my touch. I've wanted to hear my name on your lips."

Suddenly, she bent and took the neglected nipple in her mouth, as her fingers continued to tease the first. Morien cried out again, louder this time: "Oh... Striker..." Her hands caught in Striker's hair to fix the dark head to her breast.

Dazed, Morien opened her eyes to look down at Striker. The full lips were apart enough to see her glistening tongue laving the pink bud. Each sweep of wet pleasure Morien felt radiating outwards, and downwards. Even her toes curled with the sensual joy of it. Striker paused for a moment, and Morien realised that she was looking at her; violet-blue eyes twinkling at her. Her tongue had frozen on her breast, the nipple suddenly an artistic relief against the moist, pink plain. She grinned, and Morien watched as the revealed teeth moved to graze the skin. Another cry, and her toes curled again.

Surprisingly, the fear was beginning to subside: she felt relaxed, and more excited than she had done in months... years... ever. All that was important now was feeling Striker's touch - her mouth, her fingers - and the almost overpowering need to touch her in return. She reached down, again trying to insinuate a hand into the enigmatic darkness beneath Striker's t-shirt. And again, her hand was stopped.

Striker smiled, despite her own nervousness. Her own body felt stretched between apprehension and almost painful arousal. But she couldn't show Morien, so she stayed hidden, instead losing herself in the familiar actions of sex.

Except this wasn't sex. This was almost impossibly different. Her actions, her reactions, seemed heightened. Every caress and every response sent a shiver of heat throughout her body, and through her mind. It was physical... and emotional... and blissfully spiritual... All feelings concentrated into a burning haze. The boxers she'd so hastily pulled on were beginning to cling to her thighs with the stickiness. It was all she could do to stop herself from lowering herself onto the tempting thigh, just a hair's breadth away, and riding out her release. That would be the easy thing to do. And it would be one hell of a short ride. Striker knew if anything... *anything*... touched her right now she could not be held responsible for the reaction. The feel of tight fingers in her hair was almost too much.

So she concentrated on Morien. She concentrated on the smoothness of her heated skin, the

sounds of desire that sighed into the air and tremored against her mouth, and the taste of soft perspiration and craving that shimmered gently over them both.

And then the voice again, moist against the skin, sentences punctuated by kisses. "You taste so good. All of you." Striker tasted the other breast, nibbling the skin, licking round the nipple before slowing sucking half the full breast into her mouth.

Her hands were journeying lower now, fingers exploring the landscape of her abdomen: tickling along the corrugation of her ribs, palms running across soft pathways. She left a trail of electricity and desire wherever skin touched skin, her progress marked by breathy murmurs, exhilarated hums and sudden, velvet cries. A finger tracked lower, tentatively brushing against a border of soft, auburn curls.

At times like this, Morien wished she could purr. Instead, she moaned in disappointment as the American's hot mouth deserted her breast, her fingers kneading the muscles beneath Striker's t-shirt. An arm came to cushion her neck and shoulders, and there was moist breath at her ear. But, tantalising, a hand still lingered below.

Striker nuzzled Morien's neck, her own nervousness carried away by the need of her actions. She kissed and gently nipped the skin there, burying her nose in the soft scent of flowers and sex. "Jesus, you smell so fucking good. Everything about you...." She opened her mouth over the pumping vein and slowly ran her tongue up it. "I want you so badly," she said, briefly coming up for air, her voice now desperate and panting. "I want you so badly...." And she tasted the life in Morien's neck, as fingers ventured into curls below.

Teasing.

Teasing....

Morien lifted her hips involuntarily, searching out the touch, and Striker let her find it. The hand slipped further. And Morien bucked.

Striker again ran a thumb over the little bundle of nerves she'd uncovered, this time allowing the tiniest drag of her thumbnail and was rewarded with a short cry. Morien again reached out, almost clawing at Striker's clothed body. "Please," she said, "please let me touch you, cariad."

Striker moved her hand away, so it hovered cruelly above Morien's centre - not touching, just hovering like a hawk ready to dive onto its cowering prey. Except this prey was aware and exposed and yearned to be taken.

"No," Striker said. *This is about you, sweetie. This has to be about you. I can't come. Although her own words were threatening to betray her, the mere thought of this adding to the throbbing in her own groin. She suckled Morien's earlobe and whispered, "Fuck, Morien. I want to be inside you. I want to feel you round my fingers...."* Her hand dipped again, this time meeting heated liquid and they both cried out.

Morien could feel her body buzzing, and now the fear was creeping back. What if this was a seizure? Her body bucked again as a finger flickered across her labia. She was losing control and she was scared.

Striker sensed the stiffening body beside her and stopped immediately. She raised her head, looking down at the small woman. The eyes below fluttered open and she looked down into a deep, forest green. "Do you want me to stop?" Her voice was small, but strong with concern.

Morien looked up into the blue gaze. "No," she said, her voice shaking. "I want this. I'm scared, Striker, but I want this more than anything. But I need you to hurry... *please*."

Striker gave a smile, and kissed the side of Morien's mouth. Her cheek. Her forehead. Her other cheek. Her nose. A tender shower of reassurance and devotion.

And then Morien felt fingers exploring her swollen folds. She looked into Striker's eyes and knew that, whatever happened, it was meant, and she would be safe. She gave a little nod and a finger slipped inside, and she let out a warm, sighing breath.

And it was Striker's turn to close her eyes. Morien's passage was tight round her finger. The heat and wetness she felt could have been her own. She felt for a moment as if it was Morien's finger so wonderfully filling inside her. She let out a humming sigh and murmured, "God, you feel *so* good."

She opened her eyes and found Morien gazing up at her, her breath coming in short, panting gasps. "Are you okay?" she asked.

Morien nodded, her hands straining against the duvet. "Fuck me, Striker."

And Striker did, starting slowly, gently withdrawing her finger from Morien and then sliding it back in through the slick lips. Her tongue tingled at the thought of putting her mouth to those folds, and drinking. But not yet. So, she withdrew again, and again pushed inside. A little harder this time. Out and in... and little by little Morien would meet each thrust with her own small push.

So she rewarded Morien with another finger, feeling warm walls clench around the two digits, adjusting to this precious invasion after so many months. And again Morien let out a gasping cry, "Yesssss."

The Welsh woman reached a hand up, clutching at her lover's own where it rested on her shoulder. Fingers entwined. She felt as if her body was burning, her blood foaming with the heat. She could feel herself losing control of her body. Her hips started to ram forwards of their own accord, allowing for deeper and deeper penetration. She tightened again around Striker's fingers, drawing the hard digits in. She wanted Striker all the way inside, until she was completely a part of her. Her body bucked again. She was losing control and part of her felt numb. Her brain was whirring. She couldn't tell anymore if Striker was speaking or not, but words - her own, Striker's, a million thoughts - sparkled through her nerves.

God help me, I'm going to come.

Striker looked down at Morien. Her eyes were closed. Her face tight with tension.

She was holding back. Striker lent down enough to kiss a flushed cheek, letting her lips wander down to an ear. She nipped the earlobe gently, whispering into the shell: "Let go, sweetheart. I'll catch you. I promise."

Morien opened her eyes - dazed, emerald orbs looking up at Striker - and Striker drove her fingers forwards once more, shimmering the digits in the tight space. And reached for the distended clit with her thumb.

A single touch was all it took.

"Striker... Duw... STRIKER...!" It was a shout that echoed round the room. Then Morien went completely still, her body rigid and arched off the bed. Striker could feel trembling beneath her hands, round her fingers, and for a moment she had an image of pouring rain, muted voices and fear. Her hand was wet, juices surging around her fingers and down her palm. She watched Morien's face; it was taut; her eyes shut; her breath coming in short, sharp gasps. But there were words in the air, she could feel her own name exhaled into the night: "Striker, Striker, Striker...." and her own body flushed with reassurance.

So she massaged the throbbing sex with her thumb to prolong the quivering pleasure for both of them; but biting down on her own orgasm. *Not yet. Not yet....* Her ears filled with another cry, like a soft carillon in the room. She revelled in the warmth and flood of desire that was bathing her hand. An answering flood was saturating her own centre. This was so beautiful, more beautiful than she had ever imagined: hearing her own name on Morien's lips as she came, watching her lover's lithe body react so passionately to her touch; feeling muscles contracting in a heavenly vice around her fingers. She wanted to scream herself.

At last, Morien seemed to float down and Striker slowed her own actions; at last stopping with a single finger, half-in half-out of the sweet warmth; unwilling to leave.

Morien's chest rose and fell; her skin was mottled with blushing rose. Striker couldn't help but stare at the sight, feeling ridiculously proud of herself. If they had Oscars for orgasms, she'd nailed Best Producer.

Morien opened her eyes to be confronted with the widest grin she'd ever seen. "Hi," the grin said.

"Striker...." Morien's voice was breathy and low. The grin stretched even more, and the night-sky eyes above it glowed. She brought her hand up and rested it on her lover's pink cheek. "I...." She swallowed, not sure what to say, trying to regain the power of speech. "We...."

"I'm not sure about the neighbours but we probably woke your dad."

Morien's eyes widened and then slammed shut. Her voice had suddenly taken on a slight squeak. "I wasn't that loud was I?"

"Yeah," Striker replied. A pause. "It was great."

Morien's eyes peeped open again. "Yes, it was. Thank you." She rested a hand over her eyes. "I feel stupid...."

"No...."

"I was stupid to have been so scared... I...."

"It was a natural reaction, sweetie, you didn't know...."

"I couldn't have done it without you."

"Well, yeah, you could."

A small smile appeared. "True, but it wouldn't have been nearly as...." *Fun? Intense? Passionate? Loving? All of the above?*

Instead, she moved her hand from her eyes, curving it behind Striker's head to bring her mouth down to her own. She greeted the lips with a sweet, chaste kiss, and then gave out a hissing giggle when Striker wiggled her finger, reminding her where it was. No point in being chaste any more. So she reached up and claimed the lips again, this time slipping her tongue between them.

She felt alive again. Her life made sense for the first time since... for the first time... since... (she wound her hand into Striker's hair and pulled her closer, allowing Striker's tongue back inside to tussle with her own. What had she been thinking of? *Oh... yes...*) ...being alive. She hadn't felt this alive since... and an image of a gentle touch of mouths under the lilac in the Sayce's back garden swum into her mind; then swum away again as Striker pulled back, the next kiss hovering just beyond Morien's reach.

Her sex suddenly felt cold and empty as the finger was finally withdrawn and she watched as Striker brought the hand up between them. The palm was wet, the digits gleaming, and the scent of her own arousal was thick in the air.

Striker raised her hand to her mouth and licked, from the base of her palm to the tip of her middle finger. Then she sucked each digit into her mouth, swirling her tongue round each one, delighting in the taste. God, it was addictive. Morien was gazing at her, rapt, her eyes dissolve into dreamy moss. She wanted to share the flavour. She leant down, her glistening lips barely a millimetre from her quarry.

Morien opened her mouth, more than ready to accept....

And Striker smiled and pulled away.

"Wha...?" Morien reached out and pulled at Striker's t-shirt, but a hand stopped her intention. "Let me...."

"No." Striker pulled away.

"But, I want to...."

Striker grinned again. "There's something I want to do first." And much as she was still desperate for release herself, there was still one thing that was more important.

Morien could only watch as Striker moved her arm from under her shoulders and, cat-like, prowled down her body. All too briefly, she lingered at her breasts again, lapping, as if they were an oasis; then moved further, leaving a trail of butterfly kisses as she went, her loose hair tickling behind. Despite the t-shirt, despite Morien's position, she could see the muscles in Striker's back and arms moving. It was slow, sensual and predatory. In the dim light, Striker's eyes glowed. A new thrill of excitement tingled down Morien's body, as if following Striker's path; answering the need in the tall woman's burning-cold gaze.

Striker settled herself between Morien's legs; her long frame half-on, half-off the bed. She leant a cheek against a smooth thigh, breathing in deeply. She was seething with need. Two hits and she was a junkie.

That stuff they found in the chapel, anything pedalled by those power-hungry bastards, no drug in the world, past or future could ever be as addictive to her as the rush of Morien.

And here it was, the source, the font: beautiful, pink and winking with liquid. She felt, for a brief moment, like the knight keeping vigil at the Holy Grail, and....

What the hell was she waiting for? *Shut the fuck up with the poetry and go for it, jerk....*

Morien jumped as she felt the flat of a tongue slam up against her sex. And there it simply held: hot, hard, wet, and wonderfully invasive. Slowly, there was movement, a strong edge of muscle brushing up against an engorged fold, and Morien let out a breath. The tip of the tongue curled, tickling gently, but it seemed to flick a switch that radiated pleasure outwards and upwards. Morien could feel her body glowing, her core thrilling with a dripping delight. And this time there was no fear, no tension; she was simply enjoying it. She felt like laughing with joy. She moved her hands down, just touching Striker's silky head, and stroked encouragingly.

Striker smiled against wet flesh, welcoming the fingers that tangled in her hair, willingly pushing herself deeper, sucking on the folds, supping from them. She rolled her tongue and pushed it into Morien, and revelled in the groaned *Strrikerrr* that ran through the body above her. *R's* rippling across her own skin. Her nose filled with Morien's scent. She was buried in here. She could drown in here, happily.

She breathed Morien in, then pulled her tongue out and plunged it back again, sucking as she

went. Faintly, above the constant drone of her own arousal, and the tensed muffler of soft thighs, she could hear Morien moaning.

Slowly, Striker unfurled her tongue, dragging it back up the slick channel and out, replacing it quickly with a finger, relishing again the sink into Morien. She nuzzled the damp curls at her face, wanting to draw the sweet essence from each individual hair. Instead she recovered her breath: hot exhalations flowing over Morien's sensitive centre, causing a hiss above her. Tender fingertips were stroking her hair, not pushing or forcing her forward, just stroking. With a gentle awareness, Striker realised that it was a touch of gratitude.

She lifted her head, looking up the sumptuous landscape of the Welsh woman's body and found herself in Morien's gaze. A lazy smile played across her mouth, which formed words; words Striker couldn't hear, but which she understood nonetheless. "You're wonderful."

Striker flushed, suddenly shy - despite her position. She turned her head and laid her lips on Morien's thigh in a loving, thankful kiss. Then the location, the scent began to work its magic, and Striker couldn't help but kiss the skin again, this time licking the spot, tasting spirit.

Morien trembled at the simple, sensual touch. Her whole body felt on the edge of sweet shock, waiting in ecstatic frustration for the next telling tremor. She felt Striker's lips kissing again, licking - the hot moisture of the American's tongue turning her burning skin to a fervent ice in the night air.

Another kiss directly onto her sex, the probing tongue lapping again, hard fingers stroking inside, and she couldn't stifle the cry that burst from her throat. Her hold on Striker's hair couldn't help but grow stronger. She pushed her forward.

And Striker responded. Her mouth finally settling on the erect nub. She kissed it and Morien bucked up against her, causing her to take it further between her lips, laving it with her tongue, sucking it, gently grazing it with her teeth.

And Morien screamed: "Striker! Striker... Striker...." *Striker... strikerstriker....* Until her lover's name became one with the waves of climax that surged through her body.

She came down slowly, the last delicious quivers disguising the fact that Striker was no longer touching her. Dazed, she opened her eyes, to find her lover above her. In almost a single move she had stripped off her t-shirt and boxers, and now naked, hovered above her.

"Striker...", Morien breathed, and Striker descended, her mouth hard, her tongue desperate for entrance, and Morien welcomed the sweetest invasion of her own taste tingling, almost overwhelmed at the feeling... *at last...* of flesh pressed against flesh. She wrapped her arms around Striker, groaning as the American's pebble-hard nipples crushed into her breasts, and then again as Striker broke the kiss. Her smile was wide.

Suddenly, Striker dived and with juices still coating her skin, wiped her damp cheeks against Morien's face. Morien burst out laughing, a dulcet, lyrical sound that resembled her accent.

"You're fun," she giggled.

Striker grinned. "You're hot."

Morien sparkled. "And you're finally naked."

"Well, thank you for notic..." Morien clutched Striker and rolled, and Striker voluntarily found herself on her back, with Morien above her.

"You're mine now," Morien smiled, a glint in her eyes that only heightened Striker's ardour. She sat up, straddling Striker's stomach, allowing her hands to wander across velvet contours: shoulders, arms, breasts in a slow, sensual massage - writing sonnets with her touch. She could feel Striker shudder under her touch, and she revelled in the sensation. How long had she been wanting this and stopped herself?

She slipped down a little, her hands dragging over Striker's breasts, intent on bending and exploring with her mouth, to suck, lick, worship....

Striker slowly became focused enough to realise that the beautiful, agonising attentions had stopped. She looked up and realised Morien was looking at her open mouthed. And not good open mouthed. And not at her specifically, but at a point somewhere mid-abdomen. "Striker," she said, "where on earth did you get that bruise?"

"Huh?" Striker looked down to where her skin blossomed in purples and yellows. It had been worse a couple of days ago, but she had simply covered it, lived with it, forgotten about it, apart from the occasional annoying stiffness. "Oh... that. Bruce punched me at The Boom."

"Striker!" Morien's eyes were wide with concern. "Shouldn't you have had that checked by a doctor?"

"Nah, it looks a hell of a lot worse than it is."

Morien flashed anger. "And you lecture me about looking after myself."

"You're comparing an epileptic seizure to a bruise?"

"It's a big bruise."

"Oh, fuck the bruise."

The annoyance in Striker's voice was tangible and shivered with tension. Morien realised how much the American had been holding back as she had pleased her, and how desperately she needed some kind of release. Morien looked at her - apology and defiance warring within her - then suddenly, she smiled. A smile that turned Striker hot and cold at the same time. She moved a little so her centre hovered just inches from the American's colourful skin. "I will if you want

me to," she said, teasing.

Striker's only response was a frustrated, "Morien..." But Morien knew exactly what that single utterance meant. It meant: "Fucking get on with this or I'm fucking doing it my-fucking-self."

Morien smiled, stretched up and kissed the soft, full lips. "Poor baby," she whispered, only half-joking.

They both groaned at the thrill of Morien's nipples scraping against Striker's as she bent to nibble the taller woman's skin. She placed a path of nips and kisses along Striker's shoulder.

Striker sighed contentedly and let her hands ramble over Morien's naked back. Her skin felt electric; her centre was beginning to pound with need. Then she wiggled. "If you don't hurry this will be the first time in history that anyone has come from having their shoulder kissed."

Morien's lips skimmed against flesh: "Shut up and keep your legs crossed."

Lips touched her neck. Striker whimpered. Then, "Are you doing what I think you're doing?" Morien hummed against her neck. Striker ran a shaky hand through short, red hair. "I thought you were against bodily blemishes," she said, trying to keep her voice steady.

"Only when I don't make them," Morien murmured against her skin, and she felt Striker's cry against her teeth as she sucked and bit the skin.

She was Morien's now. She was marked. The lovebite tingled. As if she hadn't been Morien's from the beginning. "Jeeesus," Striker hissed.

"You like that?" A moist whisper in her ear.

"Shit, yeah."

"Would you like to see what I else I can do with my mouth, cariad?"

Striker wanted to say something cool and witty.

I thought you'd never ask.

You mean you can do something other than talking?

But with the thought of Morien's mouth hot against her sex, all she could manage was a squeaky and frantic, "Yes!"

Morien shimmied down Striker's body - momentarily lingering at the full breasts, her hands tracing lush curves - making promises to herself to explore the expanse more thoroughly later. Briefly, she detoured to the bruise, laying her lips on it, kissing it better, and Striker caressed her hair with devout thanks. The Welsh woman's sex left a path of scent and essence as she moved

downwards, and Striker followed with her hands, rubbing Morien into her skin.

Morien felt Striker's wiry-soft curls tickle her backside, and moving further, she rubbed against them, causing both of them to cry out. She could feel the American's hot, wet desire greeting, combining with her own. Slowly, sex slid against sex. Morien could feel Striker's clit pulsing like a heartbeat beneath her and the feeling made her groan. Through a daze of heat she could see Striker's throat working, fingers clutching at the duvet, clutching at her own body, reaching for Morien, beseeching....

Morien's feet hit the floor.

She settled herself between thighs drenched with desire, lifting Striker's legs, settling them on her shoulders. Then she put a finger to dripping lips. Striker jumped at the touch. Morien smiled to herself.

She knew Striker was already on the edge - was about ready to shatter - but she wanted this to last as long as possible. She parted the lips and ran her tongue from bottom to top, slowly, lingering in places when Striker's little cries of pleasure seemed louder, feeling her trembling arousal, delighting in textures and tastes. Her mouth was full of her lover's rich essence and she drank it in, catching a hint of herself as she savoured. Even here Striker was smoky and Morien wondered if she'd ever get enough of it. "You're so wet," she murmured against the folds, more to herself than the woman above her.

"For you, sweetheart," she heard in reply. "For you.... Morien... please...."

Striker was on the edge of oblivion. She felt taut and desperate. Her hands gripped the duvet. She was too scared to touch Morien. She was afraid she would hurt her. "Please," rang in her head. Please please please....

And in the midst of her storm of sensation she felt a still, small touch. A single kiss at the centre of the vortex, directly onto her clitoris and it was as if she had been set free. She cried out - her voice needing escape in noise, but it was a soft, breathy sound. A gasp: her lover's name on air.

Morien watched in awe as Striker's whole body lifted with orgasm. She arched off the bed, almost sitting up, as her very being thrust forward with the force. Her face was tense, but it was beautiful in tension: glowing and pure, as if Morien was truly seeing the woman beneath.

For Striker, orgasm had always been solitude - the time when she was ripped apart from her bedmate, to travel a journey alone. But now she felt Morien with her: the touch of her, the taste of her, the sound of her name billowing through her as if the word had replaced the blood in her veins. She was flying, and Morien was flying with her, all around her, until....

Striker crashed back onto the bed, pillows cushioning her fall. Her chest heaved. Her heart was pounding against her ribs. Gently, she became aware of a warmth by her side. She smiled. Gradually, she opened her eyes, and with her muscles still tingling and jumping in the aftermath, she slowly rolled onto her side so she was facing her lover.

Morien's face was still glistening with desire. Striker reached up a trembling hand, and caressed a damp cheek.

"Cariad," Morien murmured, playing with a lock of long, dark hair.

"Morien," Striker whispered, her voice breathy and shaking. "Cariad. What does that mean?"

Morien smiled to hear the word from Striker. She meandered a finger across silky, swollen lips. "Cariad...." she murmured, and followed her finger with a kiss. "Sweetheart....," just a touch of lips, "...darling....," she dragged her own bruised mouth across Striker's, "...love." She was about to kiss her again but was caught by Striker's gaze, as potent and personal as any kiss, and showing every possible emotion. She was held in a breathless blue space, where time and air no longer mattered. Only the two of them.

Hearts merged until there was only a single beat.

Cariad....

And the moment was over as Striker closed her eyes, crushing Morien to her, and they lost themselves in each other.

Continued in Chapter 23....

¹ From Denise Levertov's beautiful poem "The Sea's Wash In The Hollow of the Heart"

² Lle dach chi? = Where are you?

³ Be' sy'n bod? = What's the matter?

⁴ From Walt Whitman's "Darest Thou Now, O Soul"

⁵ "Buwch sanctaidd! = Holy cow!

⁶ This is a quote from Psalm 34, which was used as the title for a collection of poems by the late, great Denise Levertov. And I simply couldn't resist it!

The Athenaeum's Scroll Archive

~ Misplaced People ~

by Devize

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Chapter 23: *'Tis here where Hell and Heaven dance*¹

Up the aisle, pews on either side. It was dark around her, but she could see, as if a spotlight was following her gaze. She could see the carving on the armrests, she could feel the rising terror at the sight of glinting hinges, and she couldn't stop herself from lifting the seat, knowing what was waiting for her.

There was noise behind her. She was aware of danger creeping up behind her like the shadows on a sundial.

She wanted to get out. But she had to open the seat. She needed to say goodbye. She'd never said those final words.

She delayed it as long as possible, her hand shaking on the wood. There would be blood in the dark, the silent scream of the executed. A single gold tooth.... A chapel, a place of life and death.

She opened the seat.

There was someone there. The plastic sheeting had gone, and the body was on its side. T-shirt and baggy jeans: Pully's uniform, but the cadaver inside was bone-thin and long dead.

And the blood-soaked hair was not Pully's recognisable dirty blond dreadlocks. The hair was a mass of light brown curls. It took her a moment to identify... at one time she would have recognised the colour, she would have obsessed about the way the light played with each gleaming twist. Back in her stalker days. Her stomach turned over with the recollection. It was Tammy. Tammy from New York, who had become a distant, unpleasant memory. Tammy who had gone to the cops, whose 'betrayal' made her burn with sudden, newly-discovered anger. Tammy whose face she wanted to beat in.

She could have put her in a box all those years ago.

Was she still capable of it now?

That anger was still inside of her... simmering... threatening... she could feel it burning.

The sound of danger behind her.

She wanted to get out.

But....

She bent over, her nose filling with the musty wood and rancid stink of death, and clutched the rigid shoulder.

She wanted to get out.

She pulled at the shoulder and the body moved smoothly, almost as if it were merely shifting in sleep.

She could feel the terror rise still further, blocking her throat and filling her chest. She couldn't breathe, as if the corpse had sucked the life out of her. She wanted to get out.

Hands reached out, skeletal and sticky, wanting to embrace her. She could feel the adhesive touch on her skin, leaving her ice cold where once it made her feverish.

And now the face appeared, bloodied and bruised and unrecognisable; perhaps devastated by a bullet; perhaps brutalised by a fist.

A sigh escaped from the gaping, bloody mouth: a last breath. The eyes opened.

Deep, sea green....

And Striker woke up, sweat freezing her skin.

Every single fear, doubt, terror she had come crashing down on her. Everything she'd been holding back was clawing her skin. So close to the surface.

She didn't move for the first minute; her one free hand gripping the duvet, trying to catch her breath, trying not to wake the body that was tight against her own. Her skin was cold and sticky, and the air was thick with sex. Light was penetrating the curtains, but it was early. The glow of morning was pale and fragile, making the objects in the room look unreal.

Slowly, she turned her head.

Morien was fast asleep, lying on her front, her back bare - almost begging to be touched. A simple finger tracing a path from shoulder downwards to where the covering duvet hid treasure. The tranquil contentment on her face made Striker want to scream. A gentle sigh escaped and Striker knew she had to get out.

Quietly, so as not to disturb Morien, she slid an arm from where it lay, under her lover's body. There was a quiet murmur, she shifted in her sleep, but then settled. Striker slipped from under the duvet, recovering her t-shirt and shorts, and stole to the door.

Looking back, she watched Morien for just a moment, a part of her wanting to go back, if only to give her a simple kiss. But even that would be too much, she knew.

Closing the door, quietly, behind her, she detoured into her own bedroom, collecting a fresh pack

of cigarettes and lighter, then tiptoed downstairs. Each step brought back a kiss, the feel of Morien's body pressed against hers, the intoxicating smell of skin and arousal, the taste of her, the feel of Morien's mouth and tongue.... Her neck was sweetly sore, and she remembered Morien had marked her. For life.

Downstairs felt empty. Glancing into the kitchen she could see a half-empty glass of water, abandoned on the table. And she thought of licking liquid off Morien's full, pert breast.

In the gloom of the sitting room, she could feel Heriell's sleepy yellow eyes on her, his dark fur hidden from view in the depths of the sofa. There was no other movement.

She opened the curtains across the patio doors and struggled momentarily with the stiff bolts. With a bang that made her want to duck, the second bolt came loose and she stepped out into the early morning.

The air was blissfully cold on her skin, the still-damp stones cooling to her bare feet. It made her feel less sick. She sat herself on the bench, knees to chin, and lit a cigarette.

The sky was a deep summer blue, just touched by the awakening sun. The garden was wet and misty and held the memory of perfume from the night-scented stock. One by one, she became aware of sounds: the low hum of insects - bees dallying with the opening flowers; birdsong - tweets, chirps, trills and the sweet, poignant lyrics of blackbirds and larks; beyond that the waking cries of seagulls, soothed by the ever-present sound of distant waves.

The rustle of leaves.

A cat materialised from the grey mist, trotting out onto the lawn from its hiding place in the dark shrubbery at the foot of the garden. It was pure white. She remembered the cat in Morien's arms in the photograph.

Snowflower.

And now she understood the name. She was a compact cat - not as small as Easey, but not as bulky as Heriell. She seemed strangely neat for something so wild. She was ethereal, as if she could only exist in that moment, in that mist, at the very edge of morning. She didn't belong to the everyday world.

Snowflower was like Morien in that way.

Striker stayed completely still, watching, the only movement the lazy curve upwards of smoke from her cigarette. If she knew the observer was there, Snowflower showed no interest in her, paying more attention to her own not-quite-immaculate paw than to some lowly human. But then the cat spotted something, the tiniest movement in among the daisies, and with a burst of excitement, pounced. Striker could only guess what Snowflower had found - a woodlouse perhaps, some poor beetle, even a delinquent shrew, now regretting staying up late - but she watched feline friskiness pawing at its prey, batting it, jumping back as it moved, pouncing

again. Playing with it. Terrifying it. Slowly killing it.

Simply because that's what she was programmed to do.

Striker shut her eyes and concentrated hard on the burn of her cigarette down her throat. But Snowflower still amused herself at the expense of her victim.

Snowflower wasn't like Morien at all.

Striker opened her eyes and blinked. She thought the cat had gone, until she saw a little wave of white, deep in the daisies. A tail, moving back and forth, back and forth.

Did Snowflower come here every morning, to tease the flowers, alarm the insects, and allow Sullivan and Morien to catch a glimpse of her... if they were up early enough? Where did she go to for the rest of the time? Was she someone else's cat, part-time? Teasing their flowers, eating their food, disappearing into a misty nowhere when there was nothing else on offer?

And, suddenly, Striker thought of her father, behind bars, alone. He had no idea she was in Britain. He had no idea whether she was alive or dead.

And a thought that she'd been hiding from for too long, pounced and played. Had she driven him to drink?

Snowflower suddenly disappeared back into the shrubbery where she had come from, and Striker wanted to follow her.

For some time, she sat, staring at the spot where the white cat had vanished - ignoring the goosebumps on her skin - until she became aware of sounds in the house. A head popped round the patio door, and Striker found herself looking up at Sullivan.

"Good morning," he said. There was a pause. His mouth moved as if he wanted to say something else: *did you sleep well? Did you have a good night? How was sex with my daughter? Is that a hickey on your neck?*

Striker became deeply aware that she was covered in Morien, and she flushed with it. "Good morning," she said, quietly.

"You're up early," Sullivan said, and then looked as if he wished he hadn't.

"I...," she swallowed. "It's a beautiful morning."

"It certainly is." Sullivan looked out at the garden, proprietarily, as if the morning was his.

There was a moment of silence. Striker lit another cigarette.

"Would you like some breakfast?" Sullivan finally broke the silence.

"No, thank you, Mr... Sullivan." He smiled at her, broadly, and turned to go. "I... I saw Snowflower."

Sullivan looked back at her. "Good," he said. Another pause, and Morien's father seemed to be taking in Striker's pale face, the haunted look in her eyes. And he added, hesitantly, "Did... she... seem... all right?"

"Yes... fine."

Again a pause. Sullivan regarded her over the top of his glasses. "Good," he said again. And left. Striker heard the radio turn on in the kitchen. The world was suddenly full of talk and her mind was screaming with it. She rested her forehead on her arm and lost herself in the smell of smoke and sex.

* * * * *

Morien drifted to consciousness.

She was comfortably warm, though aware her body was only half covered by the duvet. The air was thick and cosy, like an extra blanket around her. And a further rush of happiness flowed through her as the memories returned: Striker touching her, Striker kissing her, Striker's scent, Striker's taste, the way Striker looked and sounded when she came. The fact that she wasn't scared any more. Of anything.

And right now she was ready for round two... three... four.... Where had they left off? She grinned, and in joyful and certain familiarity she reached out an arm to her lover.

And found cool sheet and emptiness.

Morien's eyes snapped opened. She listened, reasoning that Striker must have gone to the bathroom. No sound of running water. She listened out for noise downstairs: the call of breakfast might have been too much. There was no sound from the kitchen.

A glance at her alarm clock told her it was approaching late morning. Her father was long gone.

And she could have sworn there was no one else in the house.

For a moment she teetered on the border of panic, but then something caught her attention. The window was open, just a crack, and through it she could smell sea, sunshine and... cigarette smoke.

And she almost laughed: a post-coital cigarette. How apt.

Wrapping her dressing gown round herself, she scampered downstairs and almost threw herself through the patio doors.

The garden was ablaze with summer: bright, full of life and singing with joy. And Striker sat, the epitome of darkness and solitude. She was staring out into the garden as if she didn't see it. She sat, her long legs curled up beneath her, her knees to her chin. A cigarette drooped from her fingers, half-forgotten. The little flower pot she'd been using as an ashtray was packed with dead stubs. She was rocking gently, backwards and forwards. Backwards and forwards.

It was obvious she hadn't noticed Morien's presence.

"Striker?"

Only now did she rouse, almost jumping, as if she had been caught asleep at her desk at school. She unfolded her body, bare feet now touching the ground. But she bent forward, resting her forearms on her thighs. She didn't turn to look at Morien, but the Welsh woman could see the twist of anxiety on her face.

"Hi," she said.

"Hi," Morien replied. There was an awkward silence. Finally Morien broke it by moving, hesitantly, to the bench. She perched on the armrest, and laid a tentative hand on Striker's shoulder. She was heartened as Striker, apparently unconsciously, shifted slightly towards her. But the American's attention seemed riveted on the cigarette. Suddenly, she stubbed it, viciously, against the side of the pot, spreading ash, and dropped it onto the pile.

"What happens now?" she whispered.

Morien paused. "What do you mean? We eat breakfast, hope to God that Idomeneo and his merry band catch up with Bruce and Nigel..." She couldn't resist running a finger along the exposed skin of Striker's neck, tracing the hickey. She could feel the blood pulsing under her fingers. This woman was human catnip. She bent to follow her finger with her lips. Gentle, loving and reassuring. "We lay low and think of a way of passing the time."

Striker's face turned briefly, but her head was still bowed. Her voice was low. "Then you want this?"

Morien paused, her mouth hovering above Striker's neck, her breath tickling her ear. She was now in a position to see Striker's face, and the tall woman looked small and scared. Morien circled round the bench and sat down next to her, taking her hands, touching her cheek. Striker gave her a small, sweet, scared smile that didn't touch her startled eyes.

"Of course, I want this," Morien said. "Of course. What's wrong, Striker?" She tried to catch Striker's eye. "Is it me? Have I done something wrong?" Her voice began to sound fearful.

Suddenly, she felt saturated with alarm and confusion. "Was last night...?"

"No!" Striker's voice was almost vehement. And she finally turned to Morien. "It's not you. You've done nothing wrong. It's me...." Her voice trailed off.

She looked into Morien's eyes and saw love for her as clear and pure as a spring morning. And she felt as raw as a winter night.

"I've never done this before."

And with that admission Striker seemed to relax a little. She smiled briefly, chuckled even, plucked a cigarette from the packet and lit it. And after hours of insular silence, the words started to come. Low, self-deprecating and scratchy with nicotine. "Stupid, isn't it? I lost my virginity when I was thirteen years old. I've been screwing around ever since - more than half my life. Playing with fire. I'm clean, don't worry. I might be a fuck-up, but I'm not that stupid."

They both watched the end of the cigarette glow as Striker inhaled. "Sex," she continued, "it's like smoking, you know. It's an addiction, it's a comfort. But afterwards you feel like shit." She trailed off watching the smoke dissipate on the gentle breeze.

And that was it? That was all it had been to Striker? *Sex*?

A million angry and frightened questions flooded Morien's thoughts, but she bit them back. Instead, she rested her hand on Striker's knee, a touch that reassured herself as much as Striker. Her voice was hesitant. "What did you mean, that you'd never done this before?"

"Last night wasn't a comfort." She caught Morien's worried gaze, and took the hand on her knee, caressing the skin with her thumb, and spoke gently. "I mean, it was more than that. I don't know what to do now. Morien, all this time and I've never had a girlfriend... a boyfriend... I've never been in a real relationship. A committed relationship." She was back to being small and embarrassed now.

"You've never had... *anybody*?"

Striker shook her head, ruefully, breaking away. "Never committed. Never dated. Never *went steady*." She said the words as if she had bitten down on glass.

"But what about Danny?"

She didn't get an answer immediately, as Striker stubbed out the half-smoked cigarette, and when the answer did come it was couched in a sigh. "Danny's my friend," Striker said. "He never wanted commitment. I never wanted commitment. Sex was... a convenience." There was a glimmer of humour. "And he's not exactly hard to look at." She turned back to Morien and the words came in a rush. "I love Danny. He's my friend. I will always care for him. But you... *you*...."

Against the screaming of her demon judgement, she lifted a shaking hand and ran a finger along Morien's bottom lip, watching in fascination as Morien's mouth opened and her tongue slipped out to wet the tip. She licked her lips in response and took Morien's face in her hands. She wanted so badly to feel those lips under hers, to feel that tongue gliding against her own. There was a growing tension inside her - she was unsure if it was thrilling or terrifying. But she wouldn't think about it now, she needed to speak. "Morien, you make me feel..." she sought inspiration in the green depths, and found it, "...wanted."

Morien looked surprised and pleased and saddened at the same time. "Wanted? Who wouldn't want you?" She said it with a smile, with love.

But the question made the panic descend. Striker took her hands from Morien's face and turn away with a ghost of a smile. "You, for a start."

"Me?!" Morien was horrified. "Why wouldn't I want you?"

Striker reached for the half-smoked cigarette and played with it between her fingers. "It's kind of ironic, don't you think? I've never had a girlfriend, and you now have two." Morien opened her mouth to speak, but Striker bulldozed her way on. "Why would you want me? You had a perfectly good relationship before I came along and ruined it."

Morien interrupted, "And I never had a choice in this?"

"I destroy every person I get close to. That's what I do. I push them away." There was a rage in her tone that she couldn't control, and she felt it spark through her body. Her fists balled, and she could sense every punch she'd ever thrown, every kick she'd delivered, real and imagined, raging through her.

And she saw it again. Morien's face, barely recognisable, blood and bone and terrified green eyes. The stalker was still inside her. That person who could bring fear and hurt and pain. And she felt the horrifying destruction inside herself bubbling up like nausea. She turned away covering her mouth.

And Morien took it as disgust. She couldn't contain her anger any longer. "So that's what this is about? You fucked me, now you're going to dump me?"

Striker got to her feet, her head spinning; anger and love a maelstrom inside.

But Morien's words hit. "That's it, isn't it? You're too scared to be with me. You don't want to be saddled with some no-hoper epileptic." Morien almost laughed. "But you can't get out of here, because you can't be sure that if you step outside this house you won't get your head shot off. So you're stuck." Her voice, usually so soft and melodic, was suddenly as biting as acid. And Striker felt burnt.

But the pain was self-inflicted.

Striker looked down the length of the bright garden, seeing only the darkness inside. "Maybe you're right," she said, quietly. Maybe that was the answer. Let Morien believe that. Let Morien hate her. Hell, it was only a matter of time before Morien hated her anyway. She would hurt her, like she'd hurt everyone else. Was it any wonder that no one had ever wanted to be with her? It could be so easy: walking away, risking the death threats and getting out of Lleuadaeth, getting a train to London, getting the hell out of it. Going back to the familiarity of being alone.

The familiarity of stalking.

Her stalking past. Her stalking present. It would be so easy. Treat this as a longer-than-usual one-night-stand and leave. And return to the ease of fantasy - inventing her lovers as she watched them from afar, and hurting them when they became real.

And now what she had with Morien had been made real.

And now she would hurt her.

And she felt a touch of a hand on hers. Warm fingers twined round her own. A voice as soft and lyrical as music.

"Striker, you're frightening me."

And there was the problem. Morien didn't believe her own accusations. She didn't hate her. So she was going to have to break Morien's heart. For her own sake. And she would break her own heart in the process.

She remained standing.

"Please, Striker...", her hand was squeezed... pulled. "Striker, please... *please* don't go. *Please* don't leave me."

Please don't leave me. Words from years ago.

But she had left and now Striker was about to do the same thing. She looked round. Morien was staring up at her, disbelief vying with horror in red-rimmed eyes. Tears flooded down her cheeks.

And gone was the nightmare image.

It was as if she was looking at Morien again for the first time. Beautiful and pure with a wild-sea gaze.

The memory of the hospital - she had been afraid to know Morien's name, recognising it was the key to a different reality to the one Striker had invented for her. Now she knew that it was the other way round. She was afraid of Morien knowing her name - she was afraid of Morien knowing her.

Without the stalking, the violence, the solitude - she didn't know how to be.

Striker was aware of tears now pricking at her own eyes and slowly, hopelessly, she sat down. "I don't know who I am any more," she said in a voice that barely rose above her own imagination. "I thought I knew. But... but... I've been blind for years. I don't know how to *be* any more."

Morien answered. Her voice, choking down a sob, was thick with sadness, but surprisingly strong. "Striker... I don't know who you are. I've learnt so little about you in the last few days. I don't even know what your name is..." Striker closed her eyes. "You frighten me sometimes. Our relationship almost started with you frightening me."

Striker's head was down again, her words muffled by a hand. "Morien, I'm sorry, I've never meant to hurt you. I never..."

"I know you'd never hurt me. Not intentionally, not consciously. The one thing I know about you for certain is that you're one of the gentlest people I've ever met."

Striker laughed, a hollow dead laugh. "I'm not gentle. I'm capable of some really nasty shit. There's stuff inside me that scares the crap outta me."

"There's stuff inside me that'd scare the crap out of you, too."

Striker shook her head. "You're a princess, Morien. I'm a fuck-up."

"You're a gentle fuck-up." She reached a hand out, and briefly her thumb connected with Striker's cheek. "You're so gentle. Last night, when you made love to me... I've never felt like that in my life. Ever. No one's ever touched me quite that way. It makes what I did with Sophie seem..."

"Please don't talk about Sophie." Her voice was caught somewhere between vehemence and pleading.

"Striker, I'm not going back to her. How can I after this?"

There was a pause, balanced somewhere between hope and despair. "Because you deserve someone better. I'm not right for you. You deserve someone who will look after you, someone you can trust."

"No one looks after me better than you. Despite it all... I know who you can be, Striker. I'm not that stupid. You're so capable of violence. I don't understand what makes you tick. I don't understand who you are. But I want to take my chances...."

"You shouldn't *have* to take chances..." Striker said, anger in her voice. "You should be with someone who you can trust not to hurt you."

"I know you won't hurt me."

"How the hell can you be so sure, when even I don't know that?"

There was a confidence in Morien's answer that seemed to reverberate against the hum of summer. "Because I *know*. You've protected me from the start, Striker. You've had every chance to hurt me in the last week and you haven't. I even hit you, for God's sake, and you didn't respond."

There was a sigh in her voice now. But it was a sigh that betrayed a thrum of hope and the anticipation of possibility. She lifted a hand, tracing the sweep of Striker's jaw, brushing a lock of hair to one side. Simply touching. "You're gentle... kind... so sweet... You're beautiful to me, cariad. I want to know you... I want to spend my life getting to know you." Her voice fell a little... it sounded encouraging, a little frightened... it mirrored the look on Striker's face. But before Striker could say anything, Morien continued. "No. A lifetime is too long, maybe. For now, anyway. How about a day at a time? We'll take it day by day, okay?"

"Day by day." She spoke in a tiny voice that seemed to suggest she could barely make it to the next hour.

"Oh Striker." Morien put her arms round her, resting her head on a broad, tense shoulder, her words caressing skin. "You call yourself a bad girl, but you read fairy tales and children's books. You couldn't bring yourself to talk to me at first, but you can approach people, talk to them... pick them up even... give your body to them. And your job makes you mix with ordinary people every day...."

"It's role play," Striker interrupted.

"What do you mean?" Morien's voice was so soft, so loving.

"I play the part of the bad girl. I play the role of hospital porter. I play the seducer when it means nothing... and the real me hides."

Morien raised her head, and caught Striker's cobalt gaze. "So who is the real you?"

Epiphany erupted inside Striker, called by the longing and kindness in Morien's gaze. And for the first time in twenty years, it wasn't violence or anger that emerged, but a childhood of tears that suddenly burnt her eyes and spilt down her face. Striker sobbed. "I'm... I'm a ten-year-old girl who wants her mommy."

* * * * *

Deep in thought, her eyes followed the lines of the paving stones beneath her feet. Here and there

a weed found a breathing space in the cracks. Here and there, a weed gave way to a flower, lifting its face to the sun.

But Striker's thoughts were captured by the plain, straight lines of the paving stones. The sunshine was too bright for her tired eyes. She felt like she was crawling through the aftermath of the biggest bender of her life.

She had cried for what felt like hours. It had physically hurt to cry after all this time, but Morien had held her, rocking her, whispering words of love and pride.

"It's not your fault," she had murmured. "It was never your fault."

Hearing those words had hurt too, but in a different way. For twenty two years she had been clinging to a tower of guilt, terrified of falling, terrified of moving. She had been hanging on for so long that her fingers had melded with the stone. With her words, Morien had started the painful process of prying her away from her guilt. Slowly, together, they had started to win her freedom, but she ached with it.

She had felt a little better after a shower and another hug... and another.

But now she needed a cigarette, and her final packet was empty.

So Striker made her way to the newsagents on the corner of the street, leaving Morien for just a little while. And although she felt her lover's absence immediately, the air felt good on her face, in her lungs.

Her lover. Damn that sounded so good. *Damn*, it had been so good. Best sex *ever*.

A hesitation over the cracks. No, not sex. Love-making. Passionate, intense, giving, satisfying - several times - damn-fucking-hot love-making. Her body flushed with the memory... and smugness. She wanted to go find some teenagers to boast to. She wanted to show off her hickey. Even more, she wanted to turn on her heel, go back, and find Morien in the shower. There were certainly a few things she could think of doing with wet bodies and soapy hands and....

She took a deep breath of air and concentrated on the grey of the pavement. She wanted to give Morien some space. She had spent the last few hours taking care of a thirty-two-year-old baby.

Give Morien her own breath of air, for fuck's sake. You don't need to hang on her apron strings. Give her half an hour.

Just half an hour.

That was new too. Learning to let go, give space... trust that when her back was turned someone she loved wasn't going to disappear.

It wasn't your fault.

Striker sighed.

The fact is, Morien's right. Whatever she says, she knows you better than you know yourself. Get used to it, fuck-up, Morien will always be right. She's the brain, you're the brawn. Just shut the fuck up and do as she says.

So, she was right. This was new, this was different for both of them. And if this situation was different, and Morien was different, then maybe... just maybe... she could be different too.

She walked into the newsagents and asked for cigarettes.

"Ten or twenty, love?" the shopkeeper asked.

Striker avoided his eyes. It still hurt to look at anyone. "Twenty, thanks."

There was a man sitting by the counter. He didn't seem to own the place, or even work there, but he gave the impression he'd be sitting there, propped up against the counter as if it was a bar, until the shop closed. He had a white, clipped beard, but no moustache, and he wore a white, cotton sun hat, which made him look like a gnome on vacation. He was looking at her with a hooded gaze - weighing her up. "You staying here long, love?" he asked.

Striker checked the urge to swear at him. She hovered between giving him a *what-fucking-business-is-it-of-yours?* look or merely ignoring him. And then she remembered what Idomeneo had said all that time ago - less than twenty four hours ago.

I can be different.

And she gave the man a small, shy smile and met his eyes. "Probably just for a few days," she said.

The man was obviously happy with her response and gave her a beaming smile back. It warmed her. "Here on holidays, is it?"

"Kinda. I'm staying with some friends."

"That's lovely." Again a warm smile.

"And what do you think of Lleuadaeth?" the shopkeeper asked in a rich tenor, his hand lingering as he placed the cigarettes in Striker's grasp.

"It's beautiful," she said, handing him money. "I like it here."

"That's lovely, isn't it, Dai?" the gnome said.

"Certainly is, Ianto. Here's your change, love. Do call again while you're here. We sell more than

cigarettes, you know. We're a Post Office too if you need to send any postcards."

"You get any American papers?" *Hell, it was worth a shot.*

Dai looked a little downcast. "Sorry, love. I could order something in though."

"I'll get back to you," Striker said with what she hoped was an impish smile. She was beginning to enjoy this charm thing.

"All right, love. You have a nice day now!"

Striker laughed. "You too." She tipped a finger in a casual salute. And a word came to her. She'd heard it enough in The Half Moon... little half-comments between Morien and her father. "Diolch," she said with a smile, and left the shop to a tinkle of bells, leaving satisfaction and gratitude in her wake.

Stopping outside, she wondered. Dai? She looked up. Above the Post Office sign, the shop name was emblazoned proudly: *Dai News.*

They're all fucking nuts.

She was feeling a lot better. The sun was warm on her tired body; the buildings pretty and glowing white against their green hill background. The sea air caressed her face with a mother's touch, soothing her tired eyes.

Maybe everything could be different. She wandered down the main street towards the harbour square, looking in shop windows, dawdling.

There was a bakery, the aroma from which made her stomach rumble; a boutique full of clothes that seemed to hark back to the sixties; a jewellers - Striker stopped at the window display, imagining herself buying some trinket for Morien: a necklace maybe, a brooch, a ring.... One day. *One day at a time.* She stopped again outside an Indian restaurant, considering the menu in the window, wondering if Morien liked curry.

She certainly liked it spicy.... Striker grinned, remembering the night, and visualising ways of passing the afternoon. She felt a little frisson sparkle through her body, but...

Just a little longer....

It was quiet, wonderfully relaxing, only the gentle beat of everyday life touching her consciousness. For the first time in... in... so long... her mind seemed to switch off to everything but the feeling of glorious, fulfilling, unbelievable love which was peacefully exploding inside her. It made her feel excited and scared and, strangely, serene. All that remained was the slight hum of traffic: a van passed, a car; shoppers flitted from doorway to doorway - greetings and goodbyes - footsteps tapping along the pavement, a beat to the play of the wind in the trees and the wash of the waves. Somewhere there was a radio playing: a slow

climax of pop music, punctuated by the chatter of quickfire Welsh, then more music. A sappy love song. She caught herself singing along to it.

Maybe, just maybe... this would work. She was beginning to picture them living here. A quiet retreat for herself and her princess. Maybe Lleudraeth could be their happily ever after.

She reached the harbour wall. The sea was a warm blue. White horses paraded across the tranquil plain in a timeless, natural choreography. Seagulls flapped their wings and cried encore. Striker pulled a cigarette out of the new packet and lit it.

The harbour square reclined in the clement weather. A couple of people walked across to The Half Moon. Two men, boys really, walked out of The Ship Inn. Striker couldn't help chuckling. Wannabe rapper trolls on E. They glanced across at her, obviously talking about her, then went back indoors.

Cool. No need to antagonise the locals.

So it remained quiet. Beautiful.

Once upon a time - just a few hours ago - she would have shut herself off from the rest of the world, when she found this kind of quiet. She would have sat on the harbour wall, chain-smoking, and only seeing the landscape inside: a grim, dark wasteland. But now it was different. Now she no longer craved that loneliness or that landscape. Now all she wanted was to share it all with Morien.

Down to the right she could see the white-sand curve of the beach. They hadn't been there yet. There was no sign of any trouble. Surely it wouldn't hurt if the two of them went for a quick walk? She could imagine it now: the soft sand under their toes, the tickle of the tide against their bare feet; the gentle pressure of Morien's hand in hers. She could picture it: she and Morien hand in hand, followed in close procession by a romantic promenade of policemen.

She almost laughed out loud when...

Striker blinked.

Where the fuck were the police?

Yesterday, they had been everywhere - Sullivan had said so. Constable Smith had been parked at the end of Sunny Hill. She hadn't even thought to look as she'd made her way to the newsagents. She had been so fixed on the cracks....

Nowhere had she seen the telltale white and blue of a police car.

Something had happened. Had they caught them?

Striker tossed her cigarette away and crossed the harbour square. Quicker now. Maybe Morien

had heard something. Maybe Idomeneo had called. There might even have been something on the news.

Up the hill. No police anywhere. Something made her walk faster. A thought like a flash of lightning made her break into a run. She wished she'd stayed with Morien.

No traffic on the road. Much further up the hill she could see a flash of silver behind a Post Office van, turning off the road in the distance. She turned the corner into Sunny Hill. The road was quiet, still.

Nothing had changed from a half hour earlier. And Constable Smith wasn't there.

She pelted up the pavement, sneakers slapping on the stones, and juddered to a halt outside the cottage.

Quiet, still... nothing had changed.

Nothing, except a little, innocuous tabby sitting on the front porch, licking a paw; the front door open just a catsize crack behind her.

Chapter 24: *And the wind gave up in despair*

Striker crashed inside, the echoes of her own cry already bouncing back at her.

"Morien!"

Nothing.

The silence seemed to taunt her: *she's left you....*

"Morien!"

The television was flashing images to a deserted sitting room. Morien's bag - still dirty with mud - lay by the sofa. Her purse... her keys... her mobile phone....

"Morien!"

The washing up still sat in the kitchen sink. The only life in the garden was a lounging Heriell.

Striker took the stairs three at a time, her heart in her throat. Morien's bedroom. The bed had been made, but the sheets, the room, the very air was still infused with the night. Except Morien was only there in memory, and that memory was suddenly almost too much to bear.

Sullivan's bedroom... the bathroom... empty. The shower dripped. There was medication on the shelf above the sink. Surely Morien wouldn't have left that behind?

"Morien!" she shouted at the top of her voice, knowing that there would be no response.

Her own bedroom was as she had left it. She sat, for a moment, on the bed, struggling to breathe. Panic was descending like a thunderbolt. Her chest ached with it. But she couldn't let it stop her.

Could she have missed something?

Think.

Concentrate....

There were two issues here. Morien was missing. There was no sign of any kind of struggle. But, she would not have left the door open. She would not have left her medication behind. She certainly wouldn't have gone out without her keys. There was no sign of forced entry... she let them in. Could they have threatened her? Could they have hit her?

Oh God, sweetheart....

All she could think of was the way Morien had held her that morning. The way her arms had felt around her body. How much she loved her. And that what they had was suddenly gone.

Striker's whole body was shaking. She folded her arms across her chest, tightly. Her fingers dug into her sides. The pain made her concentrate.

The second issue... the second issue.... For some reason, the police had suspended their surveillance. That could only mean one thing: there was no further need to watch them. The Toussaints had been caught. But then... where was Morien?

Fuck....

Striker slammed back downstairs. Maybe Idomeneo *had* phoned while she was out. She picked up the phone, dialled 1471. A mobile number... fifteen minutes ago. *Could that have been...?* There was a discarded letter from the morning's post sitting by the phone. She scribbled the number down on the open envelope, then dialled it, nervously, and was rewarded with a tiny flicker of hope when it was answered with a brief, "Jones."

Thank God. "Idomeneo, it's Striker."

"Striker, they're about to make an arrest. It's not a good time."

"You've got them?"

"Didn't Morien tell you? The car was found in front of a house in Caernarfon. There are two men

inside, they've identified themselves as...."

"Morien's not here."

There was a pause. "What?"

"Idomeneo, the door was open when I got back. She's left her purse, her keys...." She tried to control the sob that threatened to break out.

There was a long pause from the other end of the phone.

Then.... he erupted.

"Shit, I told him we shouldn't.... Bob, turn this car round." He was barking orders, presumably into a radio. "Evans, Griffiths, Taylor, Rossi, back to Lleuadaeth now. The rest... carry on here. Smith, where are you?" There was a garbled noise in the background. "Go to Sunny Hill. Meet me there." More distorted words. "Sir, can you hold on...? Striker...." his voice was loud in her ear, "stay there. Don't move from that house. Don't answer the door unless you know it's me."

"But...."

"I'll be there as soon as I can."

The phone went dead.

An insignificant part of her realised that she'd never heard Idomeneo speak so fast.

The house resonated silence.

Striker took a few deep breaths and heard her heartbeat bouncing off the walls. She closed her eyes. *Hold on, sweetheart. We're coming....*

But....

If he was in Caernarfon, she guessed that Idomeneo was at least thirty minutes away. PC Smith was obviously closer, but....

Striker wracked her brains, desperately trying to think where they would have taken Morien. But what hope did she have?

It was so quiet. The town seemed to be holding its breath.

We look out for each other, she had said.

Striker went back into the sitting room and took the keys and the mobile phone from Morien's bag.

And left the house.

Standing at the gate, she looked up Sunny Hill. There was no sign of life. But it was worth a try. Hell, she'd spent her entire time in Britain pursuing exactly this type of search. Misplaced people: her specialty. She raced down the neighbours' path. Her impatient knocks on the door only earned her sore knuckles and silence from the empty house.

So she tried the house on the other side.

And her knock was answered almost immediately by a small, slim woman with greying hair and bright eyes.

"Yes?"

Keep calm, fuck-up. Don't antagonise the locals.

She remembered a name and took a guess. "Hello, are you... Mrs Jenkins?"

"Yes."

"My name's Striker West, I'm staying with Morien and Sullivan next door."

The woman seemed ten years younger as her face broke into a smile. "Oh, hello. Can I help you, love?"

Calm. Her nails bit into her palms.

"Ma'am, I'm a little concerned about Morien. I went out for a walk and when I got back the front door was open and Morien was gone. I'm concerned something might have happened to her. Have you seen her?"

The smile fell from the kindly face, replaced by a twilight of wrinkles. "Oh my goodness. I'm sorry to hear that, love. I'm afraid I haven't seen a thing. I've been out shopping most of the morning, only just got back, see? Are you sure Morien hasn't just popped out to the shops?"

"The front door was open. She's left her keys behind..." The sentence was finished with a dry sob, and Mrs Jenkins saw the fear in her face.

"Oh my dear.... Should you phone the police?"

Striker calmed her breathing. "Yes, ma'am. I've just phoned Idomeneo Jones."

"Oh, that's good. Idomeneo will help."

"I thought I'd ask around, see if anybody has seen anything. Would you mind looking out for the

police if I'm not around when they arrive?"

"Yes, of course, love. I've got a spare key to next door. I feed the cats when Sullivan's away. I'll let them in."

"Thank you, ma'am, that's good of you." Her voice was beginning to wobble.

"Not at all, love. Don't worry, I'm sure she'll turn up. And please let me know if there's anything else I can do."

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

Striker turned to go as the front door started to close. But was stopped by a call. "Oh, I tell you what, love. You could try Mr Maguire at Number Five opposite. I think he's been gardening in the front all morning. He might have seen something."

Hope reawakened.

Mr Maguire at Number Five. A beautifully-tended garden. A varnished wood front door. Two grey-blue eyes peering from the gloom of the house. "Hello, Mr Maguire. I'm sorry to disturb you."

"Are you selling something?"

"No, sir. My name's Striker West. I'm staying with The Llewelyns across the street."

"Oh." He opened the door a little more, but the eyes were still suspicious. "Yes?"

"Sir, I'm concerned about Morien. I went out for a little while and she wasn't home when I got back. I was wondering if you'd seen her leave, or if you saw anyone else go into the house?"

"No." His face crumpled into a frown. He stared beyond her at a hydrangea bush in full flower, apparently lost in thought.

Fucking hell, come on!

"Have the Llewelyns had any parcels today?" he suddenly asked.

"I don't think so." She had seen nothing but the few ready-opened letters.

"There was a Post Office van parked just outside the house. It can only have been there for a short time. I went out to the shed to get my clippers and it was just going when I got back."

Something prickled in her memory.

Post Office van.

It had been Smith, hadn't it? *Someone stole a Post Office van in Llithfaen.* Everyone was looking for the BMW, so they'd acquired an innocuous vehicle. And it had been driving up the hill... she'd been so close....

Striker didn't know whether to hug him or cry. "Thank you, sir. Thank you." She rushed back up the path and hared down Sunny Hill to the junction of the High Street.

Then wondered where to go next.

In the distance, fast approaching, she could see the white and blue of a police car coming down the hill. Smith.

She ducked into the newsagents, the shop bell's nervous jingling sounding her fear, as she watched the car career round the corner into Sunny Hill.

Dai News and Ianto the gnome looked startled at her sudden reappearance.

"Hello, love," Dai said. "You changed your mind about those papers?"

"No... I..."

"You all right, love?" Ianto looked genuinely concerned.

"No... no, I'm...." Her throat was burning with tears and she took a couple of deep breaths to try and calm herself. And in a brief moment of clarity, she remembered. They were a Post Office as well. Would they know about vans....?

"I was wondering if the mail had been collected yet. Has the van come?"

"No, love, not 'til later. Why? Do you want to post something?" Dai answered.

"No.... Look, I need to track down a particular mail van. I think I saw up go up the hill not long ago. Is there any way I could track it down?"

"A particular Post Office van? You'd have to contact the main depot, love."

"No... I..." She calmed her breathing again. "I... I think the van may have been involved in a crime."

There was a pause. Both men looked puzzled. Then suddenly: "Are you a friend of Dean Powell?" Ianto asked.

Striker blinked. "Dean Powell?" *Dean....* "Pizza-faced guy?"

The little man chuckled. "Pizza-faced. I like that. Yes, that's him."

"What about him, Ianto?" Dai asked, becoming as interested as Striker.

"Just something he said, that's all."

"What did he say?" Striker's voice was low with anxiety.

Ianto looked as if he was under interrogation, rubbing his head through his hat. "Yesterday, I was over at The Ship, see. Go over there on Tuesdays for the darts. He was in there with all his mates, boasting about doing a favour for some chaps up from London by playing a trick on some poor postman up Llithfaen way. Taking his van for a ride, see? A couple of his mates were trying to hush 'im up, but you know what that lad's like. Always got to be the Big Man."

"That's right, Ianto," Dai encouraged. "D'you remember when...."

And they were off.

And Striker was on the pavement, the bell barely registering her exit. He'd yelled at Morien, "You'll get yours." Had he willingly helped the Toussaints knowing that Morien would get hurt?

Well, Dean fucking Powell was about to get his.

Back down the hill - people staring at her flying form as she pushed past - back across the harbour square and straight into the shadowy doorway of The Ship Inn.

It was dark inside in comparison to the bright, white dazzle of the square. There was a murmur of voices that paused as she paused, trying to make sense of the shadows. And then the Welsh started around her.

This time Striker ignored it. She didn't have time for their petty politics. She made out the shapes of bodies against the dim light of the bar. None of them seemed familiar.

But then against the background of Welsh and laughter came a familiar tone: "Gone and lost your girlfriend, have you? Come looking for a man?"

That was fucking it.

Striker turned towards the sound, her rage giving her direction. He was there, as she thought: Dean Powell and the trolls.

He didn't know what hit him.

He was up against the wall of the pub before he could fully register the six foot hellcat of furious, terrified woman crashing towards him.

The pub went quiet again as Striker's gaze bored into Dean. She caught from somewhere:

"Excuse me, we don't want any trouble in here."

Too fucking late. You've already got it, mister.

But she said nothing to the landlord. Her only words were meant for Dean and Dean alone. "The way I see it is this," she hissed. "We can go outside, nice and quiet, and you can give me some answers. Or we can stay here and your friends and these people can watch the Big Man being beaten up by a woman. And you fucking know that I'll do it as well."

To his credit, he didn't shy away from her gaze. He stared back, his chin jutting with defiance, despite the fact he couldn't move from the weight on him.

There was a tense silence. Someone coughed behind them, but the sound did nothing to break the tension.

Then: "Want to go outside with me? Any time you want, hwrn." His voice was loud and mocking.

Striker let go of him, allowing him his bravado, but couldn't resist giving him a little push as he lead her through a side door into a small yard. Both blinked, again adjusting to the change in light, and Striker briefly made out rubbish bins, empty beer barrels, a stray crisp packet dancing across the ground.

Before she was pushed from behind, and found herself following the crisp packet. She looked up at Dean from her position on the concrete. He stood behind her, his stance foursquare, his eyes narrow, his grin smug.

The misery she was feeling seemed to pin her to the ground, but she heaved herself up, wincing, and he didn't stop her. She'd landed heavily on her knees and she could already feel bruises developing under the skin.

"That make you feel better?" she asked.

"Yeah," he replied.

"Just tell me," she said, her voice quiet.

"Tell you what?" He leant against the wall and folded his arms across his chest.

The rush of anger was as familiar as an old coat, and as heady and dangerous as crack. Just a few hours ago she'd fled her lover's bed in fear of it. But now the old part of her welcomed it with open arms. She wanted to beat this boy until his blood was spattered on the white wall behind him. And the new part of her - the Morien part of her - felt sick. Her whole body was shaking with the battle inside and out. She moved towards him, but managed to stop before she put a hand to him. Her words, though, spat venom.

"Okay, you little shit, you want to play with me, do you?"

"Name the game, hwrn."

His grin was becoming maddening.

She wheedled a knee between his legs, rubbing it slightly against a denim-covered thigh. "This is the game," she said, her voice low.

And she put a hand round his throat. It was a loose grip, but his eyes seemed to bulge, not from her actions but the belated, fear-filled comprehension that she wasn't playing. His face was an inch away, his cheeks pale, his scant puffs of breath a mixture of beer and dope.

Her voice was so quiet it was almost a whisper. "You're gonna fucking tell me what you know, or I'm going to knee your dick so hard you're going to be pissing through your mouth. Do you understand?"

She jerked her knee up just enough, and he nodded, quickly.

"Good. Now tell me where they are."

He shook his head.

She squeezed his throat.

He choked, and she loosened her grip.

And some of the fear dwindled in his eyes.

This was the game: and she'd just blinked. Another rush of anger hit her, this time at herself, and she gripped his throat again, half strangling him, holding him hard against the brickwork.

And it reminded her of the alley wall, of cold steel pressed against her forehead.... She let her hand fall, now pinning Dean to the wall only with her presence.

"You've met Bruce, huh?" she asked, conversationally.

His eyes narrowed, the change of tack puzzling him.

"You know who I mean. Big guy. Broken nose."

Dean didn't answer, but Striker saw the recognition in his eyes.

"He's one tough guy, isn't he?" Still no answer. "Suits him, though, doesn't it? He's got the cool look, the muscle, the gun.... He show you his gun?"

Dean didn't move or speak, regarding her suspiciously.

"What did he offer you and your friends to take the van? Money?... Drugs?" She searched Dean's face, looking for a reaction, but received only wariness. "Did he threaten you?"

Still nothing.

"You wouldn't want to mess with him, would you? Is that why you're not talking?"

"Why would I want to talk to you?"

She smiled at him again, ignoring his question. It was a smile that had nothing to do with joy or humour. "Funny story: you know how Bruce broke his nose?"

Oh, there was interest there, all right.

He waited, breathless, for the punchline....

...and she delivered it with a lupine grin. "I did it."

And she watched the realisation explode into Dean's eyes.

"I don't know nothin', see" his Welsh accent sputtered against her skin.

"The fuck you do. I know you're involved."

"I ain't done nothin'."

"You stole a van for them. Where'd you take it?"

"I didn't take it nowhere."

"Don't fucking lie to me, boy, I'll hurt you bad."

"And he's got a gun. You said so yourself."

Fuck.

Striker grabbed his collar with one hand, pulling him forward into the yard then ramming him back against the closed door. She punched him hard, a balled fist connecting with a cheekbone, ricocheting his head off the wood. He cried out as his pallid skin suddenly blossomed pink. "You don't understand how serious I am, do you?" She punched him again. Harder. Putting every ounce of her fear, sorrow and anger into the blow. Again, his head bounced back against the door and his eyes contracted with pain. She drew her fist back, ready for number three.

And a voice came from the other side of the door. "You all right, Dean bach?" The landlord's

voice. He was trying to open the door. Striker pushed Dean back again, using him as a barricade. Her fist still hovered before his face. Her eyes spoke volumes.

"I'm fine, Steve, we're just chatting," Dean called back. His voice sounded shrill and distorted.

They could hear the landlord's disbelieving grunt. But he seemed to go, leaving Dean to his fate.

And Striker had him. No longer was she looking at the swaggering, know-it-all jerk who had bullied Morien. He was torn between a gangster's bullet and a loaded fist.

Striker drew her arm back.

And then, in his scared eyes, she saw something that made her stop dead.

Another teenager: not knowing her place, desperate for attention.

Ten... fifteen years ago, she had been Dean Powell: looking for trouble, determined to find it. Wanting to be noticed, only to be noticed by the police time and time again. Even now, there was still a lot of Dean inside her. She'd walked a good few miles in his trainers.

She reeled back, letting him go, and his head went down, his body banging against the wall, his knees giving way entirely. He coughed, retched, spat to one side and Striker could see blood in the saliva, hear the tap of a tooth hitting the concrete.

She turned away, her back to him, fighting the wash of grief that threatened to overwhelm her. She put a hand to the wall to support herself. She didn't know how to continue. The violence that she'd relied on for so much of her life had deserted her. But what else did she have? But she had to continue, for Morien's sake. For Morien's life.

Her voice was quiet again, and she wondered if he could hear the despair. "Is this honestly just a game to you? Does it honestly not matter to you that a human being's life is in danger?" She glanced at him. "Someone you know, whose family you know?"

Dean blinked, his face swelling already, her fingerprints raw on his throat. She turned, and he flinched at her action, but she didn't move any closer.

"You do understand that, don't you? You do know that right now you are involved in a kidnapping? And it could get a hell of a lot worse. You are up to your neck in shit, man, and there's no way you're gonna come away smelling good. Not to the Toussaints, not to your friends. Right now, you're looking at prison. You really want to go down for those bastards? What have they ever done for you? Did they make you feel that good about yourself that you'd be willing to serve time for them?"

They stared at each other. Cracks were appearing, but she wasn't sure whether it was in her or him.

And then she all but fell to her knees in front of him. A hand reached out, touched his shoulder. And a new question: "You got a mother, Dean?"

His head went up. His brow creased. "Yeah," he winced as he spoke, "course I have." His hand flew to his mouth.

"You love your mom, huh?"

He paused at the question. Unsure of where this was going. Then said, quietly, "Yeah."

"She proud of you?"

She watched his face closely. He didn't seem to be able to meet her gaze. He didn't answer.

"Can she look her neighbours in the eye?"

His head went down.

"Dean, you really want to be the Big Man, huh? You want to make your mother proud? How's this for being the Big Man? How would you like to go home tonight and tell your mom that you saved someone's life today? Because that's what you can do."

Again, a pause, as if he didn't know how to respond. As if he had started to think.

Then: "I don't know nothin' about them. I swear." Despite its wheezing roughness, his voice sounded child-like, and for a moment she was almost inclined to believe him. But she didn't. There had to be more.

"When did you meet them?"

Dean's eyes darted, as if he was expecting Bruce to step out from behind the pile of beer barrels. Words came, finally, as if dragged from his throat. "Monday lunchtime."

"Where?"

"Pub. In Pwllheli."

"When you stole the van, did you take it back to Pwllheli?"

He shook his head. "Met them just outside Llithfaen."

So they'd been moving around.

"Did you know what they were going to do with it?"

He shook his head, glanced up and was momentarily trapped in her gaze. "No... I swear."

Striker had to believe him, now.

"In the pub, they must have talked to you. What did they say?"

He even looked like a small boy now. He worried his bottom lip with his teeth, causing the already inflamed flesh to bleed. He was absent-mindedly scoring the dirt beneath his fingers.

"Please, Dean. Did they ask you anything?"

He didn't speak.

"You grew up here, didn't you? You must know this area well."

He glanced up. Nodded. She rewarded him, rubbing his shoulder in encouragement.

"So what did you tell them?" Her voice was so gentle it caressed the air.

Dean sighed. "That guy, Nigel, he asked about..." For a moment, his face flashed the recognisable smirk, but was buried behind a grimace.

"What?"

"Chapels."

Striker went cold. "Chapels?"

"Yeah. Somethin' weird about his uncle liking the local architecture."

"And what did you tell them?"

He sighed again. "I told them about the Salem Chapel."

"What did you tell them?"

And it seemed that Dean was finally resigned to spilling the information. "Where it was. Where they could get the key."

Striker closed her eyes, let out a breath. "I guess you've got to appreciate their sense of irony," she murmured. And then, suddenly, she felt rejuvenated by the information. "So, where is the Salem Chapel?"

"Off the Old North Road."

Of course. And had seen it, that familiar architecture through the curtain of blinding rain. The homely little roofs of a Welsh chapel, whether it was off the Old North Road or on Tumblety

Street. And Bruce and Nigel had been looking for the chapel when they had found them.

She got to her feet, reached down and pulled Dean up, ensuring he could stay on his feet without help. He leant against the wall, eyeing her suspiciously.

One more question. She half-smiled it. "Point me in the right direction?"

And now Dean grinned in response, then winced, rubbing his jaw. Somewhere, somehow, they'd come to an understanding. And he gave her directions.

Striker let herself out of the gate at the side of the yard, looking back just the once. "Dean," she said, "thank you. I appreciate what you've told me." He nodded and put his hand on the inside door. "But, I swear, if anything happens to Morien, and I mean *anything*, then I am going to come after you."

An understanding. A mutual disrespect. But it was something to work with.

Striker closed the gate behind her, finding herself on a road parallel to the harbour square.

There was no guarantee they were at the Salem Chapel.

They had the whole of North Wales to choose from. They might have taken her back to Pwllheli. They could even be taking Morien back to London.

Except for one thing... and this was what kept Striker running... they didn't just want Morien, they wanted her too. And for that, maybe, they would stay close.

So she ran.

The little town suddenly seemed big. Street after street of anonymous houses, whitewash and red brick and sagging grey in the sunlight. It was mid-afternoon now. The sun was moving, leaving them for the cool sea.

She was jogging downhill. The houses were becoming fewer.

Maybe if they got out of this alive, they could go and see the sunset again. They had to get out of this, there were too many things she wanted to do with Morien, wanted to say to her....

If they were going to get out of this, she had to give them a fighting chance. She slowed a little, drawing the mobile phone from her pocket and the crumpled envelope, emblazoned with the smudged telephone number. The little display showed the failing signal. But she had to try.

The answer was gruff.

"Idomeneo?"

"I thought I told you to stay in the house?!" The voice was purple with rage and concern, every word clear, despite the signal. "Smith's there now. Go...."

"I have a lead on where they might be."

The further downhill she moved the more tenuous the link became. "Go back... Sunny Hill.... Now! We'll meet...."

"If you can still hear me, Idomeneo, I'm going to the Salem Chapel."

"You're breaki.... ...can't hea...."

She enunciated every word: "I'm... going... to... the... cha...." The line went dead.

* * * * *

The sun was on her face.

She blinked, trying to get her bearings, and shook her head. Only then did she notice that her hands were warm and scarlet. They were in her lap, one partially covering the other, and were patched with red against the background of aquamarine cotton. She moved them, and the red patch stayed where it was... contrasting with the colour of her dress.

Her sandaled feet were blue. Her left elbow was grass green.

She looked up to the stained glass window above her, depicting an expressionist vision of heaven - green hills and blue skies, flowers and animals. Wales.

She blinked again, stretching the crick out of her neck, and looking around her. She knew exactly where she was: the tiled floor beneath her feet; hard beneath her backside, the uncomfortable wooden pew, uprooted from its former row and now joining others round the walls, leaving the main space free. Sometimes this building was used to stage art exhibitions, but at the moment the walls were bare, save for the colours shimmering from the few coloured windows. Sometimes it was used as a meeting place for local societies, a practice hall for the creative in the community. It was exactly as she had wanted its Tumblety Street equivalent to be.

But it seemed that on weekday afternoons in late June, the Salem Chapel was left to its own devices.

Or the devices of those who used it solely for private purposes.

Her head hurt. She had been hit again, she thought. But not so hard. She hadn't lost

consciousness. But from the time she had opened the front door expecting Striker, to the moment she became aware of her surroundings, the journey had been a giddy blur of dark, light, rough hands and voices.

Morien sat on a pew, to one side of the main hall. The room seemed bathed in shades of grey and wood, except for the few dancing colours. She risked further movement, stretching her arms, her legs... they weren't tied. She sat up straight to stretch her back, and halted.

She wasn't alone. The door was open into the small porch, air from the outside stirred dust in the sunbeams. She could sense rather than see the presence of two large individuals enjoying the afternoon. She could smell cigarette smoke on the breeze.

And suddenly she became aware of movement. It wasn't fast or threatening, merely the patient movement of a man rocking forward on the soles of his shoes.

* * * * *

The lane was narrow, with ragged hedges on either side, interspersed with trees. Striker dodged from cover to cover to avoid being seen. She was hot and exhausted; a blend of fear and sunshine made her sticky with sweat. She wished she'd thought to tie her hair back into its usual plait as it yet again pasted itself, uncomfortably, to her face.

But none of that mattered.

The Salem Chapel had become a guiding light to her. She had thought that, at least, she could find another clue to Morien's whereabouts at the chapel, but the recent, distant peep of metallic red between twisted branches had made her heart pound with anger, love and adrenaline.

She could see the break in the hedge ahead. Moving an inch at a time, pressing herself into the leaf shadows of the overhanging bushes, she crept towards it. And from a patchwork of glimpses through moving leaves, she gathered her scattered wits and her bearings.

No wonder Morien had been drawn to the Tumblety Street chapel. This was the same shape and design as its London counterpoint: small and sturdy, the windows high up on the walls. Except this was the developed photograph. This building was bright and whitewashed, concealing its stone-armoured walls. It was surrounded by a gravel parking area. The Post Office van peeked from around the back of the building, seemingly taunting her. The entrance was to one side, sheltered by a porch, and she could see Nigel and Bruce, sunning themselves, smoking. They were talking quietly, throwing comments backwards and forwards, but she couldn't hear what was being said.

But she could see the gun that Bruce held in his hand, and wondered if it was the same one she

could still feel pressed to her forehead. From time to time he tried to spin it on his finger like some latterday cowboy. He wasn't succeeding and Nigel's taunting laughter drifted to her on the slight breeze.

Beyond were fields. Further up, the lane turned and she knew now that it came to a halt with a bridge and a phone box.

What the hell was she going to do? Crouch under this hedge while ants crawled up her shorts, and her grazed knees stung? They had Morien. They were armed. If she surprised them, she could be shot. Worse still, Morien could be shot. She couldn't break in without alerting them: the crunch of the gravel would see to that.

They might be taking a chance by being this close to Lleuadaeth, but they were here for more than irony. They couldn't have found a better building to hide in. The basic layout of interior would be safely familiar to them. They could see who was coming for miles. They could hear who was coming because of the gravel. And should they choose to barricade themselves inside, anyone outside would be hard pushed to break the siege.

She had only got herself this far because she was one person.

One desperate person.

And there was only one course open to her.

Besides, if it worked on two London cops it would work for them, wouldn't it? Though she was going to make it a little harder for these bastards.

Carefully, she felt around in the grass beneath her feet, and under the hedge, and her hand closed on a rock... big enough, heavy enough to hurt like hell with the right speed, but light enough to throw some distance. Baseball weight.

Striker took a couple of deep breaths, murmured a heartfelt prayer to her red-haired, green-eyed destiny under her breath, and moved. She had the perfect target: the bandage across Bruce's nose was large and prominent. She hit it dead on. *Still got it.*

An anguished cry was carried away by the breeze.

While his brother was bent over, grasping his face in agony, Nigel's eyes flashed towards the road, his own gun ready. And she stepped out into his sights.

"Hey, guys," she said, "you didn't think I was going to give myself up without a fight, did you?"

* * * * *

"Are you all right? You're not hurt, are you?"

The man was average height, middle-aged, slender, with cropped, grey hair and a bald patch. He too was dressed in a suit, but it seemed a little too big for him. And it was old. He would have seemed dapper once, but not now.

Morien felt dizzy. She sat back heavily, her hands clutching the edge of a seat.

The man continued to talk. His voice was quiet, pleasant even; his accent carefully refined, but with a bass note of Cockney. "I'm sorry about the boys. They seem to have a proclivity towards aggression. Conversation is far more civilised, don't you think?"

Morien looked at him. Expressions fought on her face. Puzzlement, anger, fear....

"I'm sorry," the man repeated. "I should have introduced myself, Miss Llewelyn." He held out a hand. "I'm...."

"I know exactly who you are, Mr Lamprey." She did not take the proffered hand. "The police have been watching us, you know. They're probably on their way already."

Gilbert lowered his hand. "Ah, yes. The police. They're very enthusiastic up here, aren't they? I've organised a little slight of hand to keep them occupied elsewhere. A rather convincing slight of hand, as well." He smiled and sat himself down next to her, leaving a polite distance between them. "You and I... we've got a little history between us, now, haven't we?"

Morien didn't answer. She couldn't look at him. She held her head up, though, taking in the familiar surroundings of the chapel; so similar and yet so different to its London cousin.

"You tried to get in touch with me a little while ago. With hindsight, perhaps we should have talked then. It would have avoided so much unpleasantness, don't you think?" Again, Morien didn't reply. "But then, hindsight is twenty-twenty. Isn't that what they say?" He looked at the silent woman, the strain on her face. "I'm truly sorry for what has happened to you, Miss Llewelyn. What happened in February was unwarranted, and without my approval. The men responsible have already been punished."

Morien swallowed, concentrating on the wooden beams crossing the ceiling.

"I deeply regret the... difficulties... you have had as a result, and should you need any financial support for medical bills...."

Now Morien looked at him, her hand unconsciously fingering the day's headscarf. "How the hell do you know about that?"

He looked genuinely apologetic. "I do know a lot about you, Miss Llewelyn. Unfortunately, it

has been rather necessary to keep an eye on you over the last few months. You stumbled into a rather sensitive operation."

Suddenly, he reached round behind him, and Morien caught herself recoiling, expecting a gun. Instead, he pulled out a thermos flask. He unscrewed the plastic cup from the top and poured out some brown liquid. "I'm sorry," he said, "where are my manners? Would you like some?" He held out the cup.

Morien shook her head.

"It's only tea." He saw the fear in her eyes. "Look, I'll show you." He took a little sip from the cup and held it out to her again.

Morien shrunk back.

Gilbert shrugged and took a larger mouthful of tea. "As I was saying, we've had to keep an eye on you; watch your movements, if you will, and I have learned a lot about you. It is a pleasure to meet you properly, though; have a chat face-to-face."

Morien looked down into her lap.

"I was hoping to speak to your friend too. I had hoped the boys would bring her along. Miss West, isn't it?" Morien looked up and he smiled, obviously grateful to have caught her attention for just that moment. "I haven't really had a chance to see her yet, except from afar, of course. She seems like a special lady." Gilbert smiled again. The light in Morien's eyes betrayed the chink in her armour. "You and she... your friendship is very new, isn't it?" Morien clasped her hands together on her lap.

"But she's very precious to you. You're very lucky, Miss Llewelyn, to have a relationship like that. I sometimes think...."

He trailed off, and the unfinished sentence made Morien look up again. And now he was looking away; his expression reflective. He had a delicately handsome face, a little rounded by years. She would have expected him to be hard, predatory, not this softly-spoken... gentleman.

He looked up and caught her eye. "Strange about Miss West. We haven't been able to find out much about her. Obviously, we've had very little time since she appeared on the scene, but.... It was easy to find out where she lived, but she's not a registered voter. Her local council don't seem to know of her existence.... I half wondered if she was an illegal alien. She's an American, isn't she? It's the name, I suppose. There are an awful lot of Wests in London. And Striker. That must be her nickname, surely?" He glanced at Morien. "Do you know her given name?"

Morien looked away, gazing out of one of the plain glass windows; staring at the blue sky beyond.

"But, of course, you wouldn't tell me. Your loyalty is admirable. I would like to meet her,

though. The boys say she's very beautiful, or words to that effect." He grinned now, almost chuckled. "They're very... taken with her. She has a great deal of spirit, your Striker."

And there it was, the tiniest glimmer of a smirk on Morien's face. She hid it well.

"Unfortunately, she seems to bring out the worst in the boys. They've never learnt restraint... subtlety. They take after their father." He sighed. "You know, when they were little, when Charlie was... away... I'd help my sister out, babysitting, you know? I remember telling them the Aesop's fable of the sun and the wind. Do you know it?"

Morien gave him the ghost of a nod.

"Persuasion is better than force. They never did understand it. I seem to remember Nigel snatching the book out of my hands and hitting Bruce over the head with it."

Morien stifled a smile.

"As I said, no subtlety. Stopping you on the road, for example: a stupid thing to do. Although, they are learning: planting drugs on your friend. That was good. A gamble, but good. And the phone calls, of course, they worked on a number of levels, I thought. That was the boys' idea."

"You scared me. You broke into my home."

"Yes, we did. Again, this was a necessity. We realised that you still had evidence, you see. A certain erroneous printout in your proposal. My name appeared by accident on the council database for only a few hours. It was removed as soon as one of my associates spotted it, but you had already...." He smiled. "All this trouble for a silly piece of paper.... Can you confirm, Miss Llewelyn, you have given it to the police, haven't you?"

Morien nodded.

"Hmm." It wasn't an angry sound, simply a sound of thoughtfulness. He pursed his lips. Then gave a quick, decisive nod himself. The smile reappeared. "I understand your proposal was wonderful, by the way; an awful lot of potential there. I wanted to be an architect when I was younger, you know, and then business got in the way, so to speak. Had the circumstances been different I might have helped you at Tumblety Street... fascinating architecture there, isn't it? And now that I see this place, and can understand why you were so drawn to it. But we all had to concentrate on the Woodhall Estate project. I'm a great believer in these regeneration projects, you know, especially when they take the *whole* community into consideration."

"You reduced crime on the Woodhall Estate for the Council...?"

"Not difficult, considering most of the dealers on the estate were ours in the first place. And we were able to offer a little friendly persuasion to the others... And, of course, in return the Council gave us redundant buildings for our own purposes. It was a nice, neat deal. No one had to get hurt. No one should have got hurt. The people of the Woodhall Estate were happy. The Council

would have received universal praise for their accomplishments in regenerating an inner London estate. Certain council members could now afford a holiday home in the sun, a nice new car, the kids' school fees. And me and my colleagues had premises from which we could continue with our other interests and expand our client base beyond the East End. No one should have been hurt."

"What about the Boom Shack?"

"Ah, now that wasn't connected. Unfortunately, Miss Llewelyn, that's a reality of the business I'm in. In financial parlance they call it a hostile takeover. Some businessmen practice their hostility on paper in a boardroom. Others have to be a little more... physical." He finished his tea. "I don't like that side of it at all. As I said, conversation is far more civilised."

There was a pause, until Morien ventured a question. "Mr Lamprey, why am I here?"

Another sigh. "Oh," Gilbert said, "down to the matter in hand, then? I suppose we must." He screwed the cup back onto the flask and put it away. "I suppose we're here to ensure your silence, Miss Llewelyn."

Morien's eyes widened.

"Admittedly, much of what has happened over the last week has not been well handled. Mistakes have been made which have been more than detrimental to yourself and Miss West. I appreciate just how upset you must have been. I would like to make amends...."

Again he trailed off.

"Amends?" Morien blinked. "You're bribing us to keep quiet?"

Gilbert looked uncomfortable. "Bribery's an unfortunate word. It has such unpleasant connotations. I'd prefer to see it as a little commercial transaction for our mutual benefit."

"What's the point? The police have already raided Tumblety Street. That's all the evidence they need, surely?"

Gilbert shrugged. "I accept that that particular venture can't be salvaged, and sadly some of my associates will no doubt serve some time at Her Majesty's pleasure, but there's always ways and means. And you and your friend are key to the police investigation, especially when it comes to the boys. Your co-operation with us will not go unrewa...."

Morien almost laughed. "Your *boys* made our lives hell - there's a man dead, for God's sake, another in hospital - and you expect us to *help* them?"

"I can understand your concerns, Miss Llewelyn. The boys have not always behaved as I would have wanted, and for this I can only apologise. But it will be in your interests to co-operate with us."

Morien stood up as if she could go. "Mr Lamprey, perhaps I ought to thank you for your offer, but I don't care about money. I have everything I need. And even if I didn't, the answer would still be the same. No."

Gilbert sighed deeply and his shoulders slumped. "What a pity. I was really hoping you would say yes, Miss Llewelyn, please believe me. It's all so needless."

Morien stood her ground, and looked him straight in the eye. "So... you're going to kill me?" She was stunned at just how calm her voice was. Her heart was crying out. She wondered if Gilbert Lamprey had a gun. Or whether it would be Bruce or Nigel who would put a bullet in her head. Probably the latter. Gilbert Lamprey didn't get his hands dirty.

Perhaps it was the best. Maybe if she offered herself to them, they would leave Striker alone. Maybe this would end it all.

But such a short time with Striker, when she'd dreamed of a lifetime. That thought made her heart bleed.

"Oh, goodness, no," Gilbert interrupted her thoughts. "I think that would be a little inappropriate. I told you, Miss Llewelyn, I'm a subtle man." He smiled, his face friendly. "And please remember, I know a lot about you. I know where your brother lives, for example. I believe you have two little nephews, is that right?"

And Morien's blood froze.

"Don't you touch them!"

"I have no intention of touching them, Miss Llewelyn, because I know you're an extremely intelligent woman and we will be able to come to some agreement...."

How could he sit there, that calm, kind expression on his face, and threaten the lives of two children?

Morien sat back down, despair washing over her like plague. "Mr Lamprey...."

The door banged open, and they both jumped. They could hear swearing beyond. Gilbert's soft face crumpled in puzzlement, interest... a flash of anger? The back of the chapel was in shadow, now. The sun had moved. They both blinked into the darkness.

"Sorry, unc," a voice called, "but we found...."

"I found *you*, you fucking asshole," an unmistakably American accent responded.

"Shut the fuck up, you bitch."

There was a sound of spluttering in the background. "She broke by fucking dose...."

"Again," Striker said, as Nigel pushed her into the chapel hall.

Morien was on her feet, rushing towards her. Nothing mattered any more. All she needed was Striker. Striker's arms round her. Striker's kiss. Striker's body against hers. And a million guns and a million gangsters were never going to keep her away.

She threw her arms round her, burying herself in the soft smoky smell of the woman she loved.

"Sweetheart," she heard whispered into her hair. "Sweetheart, did they hurt you?" A hand came up and lifted her face, and she rose like a lark into sky blue.

"No, I'm okay, cariad. I'm okay," she said. She caught Striker's hand. "You've got blood on your hand." She ran a careful finger over grazed knuckles, then put her lips to them.

"It's nothing," Striker whispered and reached down for a kiss. A little caress of benediction, a sweet touch of thanksgiving, and then, not caring about their company, soul-deep devotion.

They barely heard from behind them Nigel's murmured comment, "If you two are going to get a room, can I come?"

"Nigel, a little respect please...."

This voice Striker didn't recognise. She finally peeled herself away from Morien and turned her attention to the man at the other end of the chapel. "It's a great pleasure to meet you, Miss West," he said. He seemed small as he stood in the last remaining sunbeam, his hand held out in greeting. He smiled, welcoming.

And Striker strode up the room, her hand still clutching Morien's, pulling her on. "Are you Gilbert Lamprey?"

"Yes," he nodded, encouragingly, as the woman broke into the light, "I'm...."

And then his expression changed. His lips moved, but no sound emerged. Then "Oh my God" as if it had come from air. The colour seemed to drain from his face before their eyes. He stared at Striker as if he'd seen a ghost. "Who are you?"

Striker stopped. "What the fuck do you mean?"

He seemed to almost sway where he stood, his hand unconsciously raised to his chest. Then he said a single word that lingered in the chapel like a mote of dust in the dying sunbeam.

"Judy?"

Striker looked as if she'd been slapped.

"What did you say?"

Gilbert's lips were trembling. "You're the spit of her."

Striker took a step towards him, and he seemed to brace himself rather than take a step backwards. Unsure of what was going on, Morien kept a firm hold on Striker's hand. She could feel the muscles tense as steel under her fingers.

"Who?" The word was like a barest breath of air.

"Judy," he said. "Judith Bailey. No, no... maybe you *are* a little different from her. You're taller, darker. But you look just like her."

Morien looked at Striker and saw tears glimmering in her eyes.

"How... how do you know her?"

And Gilbert Lamprey's smile was back. Even more calm, even more gentle. His eyes gleamed with memory. "She was a friend of mine, a long time ago now. Years ago." He looked at her, his eyes clearing like the sky after a storm. "You're Rosie, aren't you? Little Rosamund. You must be. Of course, Rosamund West, the daughter in America. She used to talk about you all the time. She had photos of you..."

Striker closed her eyes. The use of that name was both a torment and a balm to her. She hadn't heard it in years.

"Where is she?"

"What?"

"My *mother*... where is she?" She sounded like a child now. There was an edge to her voice that made Morien's heart break.

"You... you don't *know*?"

"I haven't seen or heard from her for over *twenty years*." And then the anger came. It coursed through Striker's veins: hot, desperate and terrifying. The very walls seemed to fortified themselves in readiness. Morien felt Striker shift under her hand and she jumped at the movement and at the burst of rage that burnt her like an electric shock.

The shout echoed around them like a gunshot: "Twenty years not knowing... *WHERE IS SHE?*"

The reply was as gentle as the question had been violent; the voice almost conciliatory. "I could ask you the same question."

"Tell me. Tell me where she is. Tell me...!"

It happened too quickly.

Striker launched herself forward, reaching for Gilbert. She was taller than him, stronger than him. She took his arms in her hands and shook him. Hard. His eyes were wide, staring up at her. He braced himself against the onslaught. It didn't matter that he was the crime boss and she was his victim. She had the power.

"Stop," his shouts were as loud as his assailant's. "I don't know! Stop!"

He staggered back, breaking free from her. Now Morien moved forward reaching out for her. But Striker hadn't finished. She pushed on, her outstretched hand more beseeching than threatening...

...when she was stopped by a blast that echoed around the room.

She stumbled, almost tripping, but caught herself before she fell. She stared at Gilbert Lamprey, his eyes mirroring her own shock. Again she tottered forward, unable to stop herself...

...and another blast.

And a voice, nasal and spluttering, "Don't you fucking hurt my uncle."

Striker wheeled round, her mouth was open. She could taste blood. She looked at the brothers, standing in the shadow in the doorway; the glimmer of the gun in Bruce's hand.

She looked down at her hands. They were warm, scarlet...

And the pain blossomed inside her until there was nothing left of her except pain. Without thinking or feeling, her head went up, her eyes closed. She had no control any more. And somehow her eyes pried themselves open, and she was caught...

...in the greenest gaze.

My love.

My life.

"Morien?" Her voice sounded strange. It bubbled. Hot liquid spilled up from her throat. It tasted of metal. Her mouth filled.

And another blast.

And the force of it carried her to the floor.

It was dark in the chapel. From somewhere, someone was shouting, "No!" A man's voice. She thought... she thought she could hear sirens.... Then there was a soft touch, a gentle, sweet, loving touch.

"Striker." Morien fell to her knees.

All was chaos around her. There were voices behind her, shouts, "Fuckin' hell, bruv, we gotta get out of here." Doors banging. Gilbert Lamprey, had slumped against the wall, his cheeks bright with tears.

But nothing, nothing was worthy of her attention. Only Striker.

Cariad....

Blood was seeping from her chest, her abdomen, everywhere. She tried to stop the flow, putting her hands over a possible source. It was as if she could feel the slowing pulse of Striker's heart under her fingers.

Oh God, please no.

"Morien...." She could barely hear her voice now. It seemed to ooze out of her mouth, saturated in blood.

"Don't talk now, cariad, save your breath."

The almost imperceptible shake of a head. She had to say this. If it was with her last breath, she had to say this. There was no pain now. Beyond pain, her body felt numb. She tried to move her arm and was surprised when it rose, almost despite her efforts. Morien caught it in her own, kissed the palm. *Don't do that, sweet thing, you'll get your beautiful face all bloody.*

It felt as if she had the weight of the world on her. So much left to do. And she'd failed. She wasn't a knight. She was a fuck-up kid meeting death on the floor of a strange building in a strange land. And the only thing she'd ever done right was fading in front of her.

Gimme time, please... give... me... time.

One more thing to do right.

Her chest seemed solid. No room for air, no room for life, it was filled with blood and love and that was all. But, she had to say this.

And before Morien left.

It was like she was fading away. Her eyes felt heavy with sleep. That would be good: to sleep, curled up with Morien. That was what she wanted.

Morien reached down, trying to wipe some of the blood from Striker's face with her hand. Striker wanted to kiss it.

"Morien..." she said.

"Striker, don't..."

"Morien," her voice a whisper. She clutched her hand, felt the sinews of muscle and bone in her fingers. Each word now. An effort. Pushed. Almost trapped. She looked into that beautiful sea-green gaze, filled with tears, and said it:

"I..."

...love...

...

...you...."

Morien's breath caught in her mouth.

And Striker's eyes closed.

There was no sound in the chapel.

No sound.

Morien realised the heartbeat she could feel in her fingers was her own.

"Striker?" Her voice seemed small in the silence.

The woman before her was quiet and still.

"Striker... can you hear me?"

Nothing.

"Striker... please, sweetheart.... Striker...?"

She put her hands to Striker's face. Pushed away a lock of hair from her forehead. It was stiff with wet blood.

She bent down trying to catch a breath. There was nothing, only the bubble of scarlet at Striker's mouth. She felt a sob begin to tear her apart. She stifled the cry that threatened to slash its way

up her throat.

Maybe if... Her hands still cradling Striker's face, she bent down and captured the drowning mouth with her own. The full lips were wet, warm and salty beneath hers. She could taste metal on her tongue. "Sweetheart...", she whispered against the still mouth. "Live for me, cariad, please."

"Come on, love, let us take her."

There was a woman at her shoulder. A man behind. And suddenly the chapel was full of people and sound and noise and Morien felt as if something inside her had snapped. A connection... a lifeline....

The paramedics were there, crowding round, police everywhere; Gilbert Lamprey was led away, blood splashes on his old suit, his hands cuffed behind his back, his face as grey as the eyes trained on Striker. He was saying something to her.... "I'm sorry... I'm so sorry...."

There were hands on her shoulders. "Come on, Morien, love." Idomeneo was here.

She had moved without even knowing it. There was distance now between herself and Striker. She couldn't see her. They had hidden her. And then she heard a noise, a strange, unearthly keening noise that seemed to ring all around her.

And she realised it was coming from her.

Chapter 25: *Branwen's starling*²

She was a shadow covered by the night.

She was the silent corner in a storm of midnight noises.

She was the dead centre of a nightmare vortex.

Gently, Sullivan led his daughter through the front door of the cottage.

At least she had stopped shaking now.

Carefully, he sat her down on the sofa. He kept his voice low and soft. "Can I get you anything, cariad?"

There was an almost imperceptible shake of her head.

"Not even a cup of hot chocolate? Just to warm you up?" He gave her bare arms a rub. She didn't

answer, so he took it as a 'yes' and went to put the kettle on. He then took his place again, crouched down in front of his daughter. He placed his hands soothingly on her clasped fists. "I think you ought to have a wash and get into some clean clothes, sweetheart, all right?"

Finally, Morien took in her father's words, and looked down at herself. Her cotton summer dress, once aquamarine, was now brown and stiff with dried blood. A nurse had bathed her face and hands at the hospital, but her arms and legs were still coated.

"I'll get a bath running, okay?"

Morien looked up, and Sullivan was swallowed by the loss in her eyes. It was a feeling he recognised; had almost forgotten. And the searing pain that had diminished over the years almost resurfaced. He felt tears block his throat, echoing his daughter's sorrow and remembering his own grief. But he needed to be strong. He buried himself in the mundane.

It had been terrible when Idomeneo had come to the school to find him. The policeman had arrived just after the last class, with students still a chaos in the hallways. Sullivan had seen him through the throng. He had known the moment he saw the big man that something was terribly wrong. He had been wearing a raincoat... on a fine day... hiding the blood on his shirt. Sullivan had heard the quiet, professional words in his ear, "I've come to take you to the hospital. Morien needs you," and the world had contracted around him.

Pale and shaking, he had left with Idomeneo for the hospital, to find his daughter inconsolable.

She had been sitting in a shadowed corner of the waiting room, as if the light would damage her. A policewoman sat nearby, on hand, but not too close, seemingly concerned that the woman's silent anguish was infectious. Sullivan had lifted her face and in the twilight of dark neon he'd seen the brown blood clinging to her skin, and he had thought it was hers.

She had let words drift over her, of explanation, of condolence, of instruction, yet all she could hear were those three words in the blast of sound: *I love you.*

She hadn't seen Striker again. They hadn't let her. So she was left with the recurring image of gunshots ripping through her lover's body. Of dusk falling on blue sky eyes. The blood red of their lives. Those words...

I love you.

I love you.

I love you, too...

She clung to the phrase as it bridged life and death.

And slowly, like dripping reality, annoyances started to crack through. They were talking at her... over her.

"There's nothing you can do here."

"You ought to go home."

"It's best for her... consider her own health."

"There's nothing she can do here."

Nothing I can do....

"Daddy, I need to stay with her."

"Morien, love, come on...."

"No."

"For your own good."

"I don't care about my own good."

"Please, cariad...."

"I'M STAYING HERE!" Her own voice unreasonably loud in the hush of the hospital. People she didn't know or didn't recognise in the haze of darkness, standing round, telling her what to do.

"You can't stay here. Please, Mo, there's nothing you can do now." And she'd watched the tears fall down her father's cheeks. So, she'd cautiously accepted the drink which had been sickly and made her gag and....

A journey as blurred and incomprehensible as the one in the back of the Post Office van.

Now, Morien sat on the sofa.

It had been something to help her relax. It made her body feel heavy and her mind feel numb. Now, she couldn't think. She didn't want to think of what had happened. Her thoughts were a kaleidoscope.

So she sat.

"Come on, sweetheart," she heard her father say. "You'll feel better after a bath."

It was as if her mind was trying to zoom in on a single thought, but wouldn't focus. A thought struck her. "I ought to phone...."

Her father interrupted, "It's too late to phone anyone tonight. We'll sort things out tomorrow."

"You've got work tomorrow."

"No I haven't. I'm taking some time off. You need me right now. And I'll phone anyone that needs phoning, you just give me the numbers, all right?"

She nodded, half understanding what Sullivan had said. "Asha," she said, "so she can tell Danny...."

"Okay...", Sullivan said, letting her go on. There was a pause that even Morien noticed. "Cariad," he ventured, "should we be phoning anyone in America? Do you know anything about Striker's parents?"

Her brow creased. *Striker's parents*. In the brown confusion of her thoughts, her mind fixed on a single fact. She looked at her own father, concern shining in his eyes. "He knew her," she said. Her voice was faint and searching.

"Pardon, sweetheart?"

"He knew her... he knew her mother."

Sullivan shook his head slightly, not quite comprehending what his daughter was saying. "I'm sorry, my love, I don't understand...."

And then the expression on Morien's face changed. Her gaze grew grass-soft and faraway. "Striker's name is Rosamund." She half-smiled. "Isn't that a beautiful name? Rosamund West." Then blind confusion creased her face. "Daddy, I didn't want to leave her. What am I doing here? I need to get back..."

Sullivan's voice stayed calm despite the fear that was beginning to invade him. "Mo, my love, there's nothing we can do there. It's best we stay here and get some rest."

Morien looked at her father - the familiar hazel eyes, the worried gaze behind the shining glasses. He really did need a haircut. Her voice was barely a whisper. "This is hell, isn't it, daddy?"

She could see his throat move as he swallowed. "Yes, my love, it is."

Morien's shoulders slumped and she closed her eyes, then seemed to make a decision and nodded. She stood up slowly, as if every bone was creaking, and moved out of the room. Her father heard each careful step upstairs and then heard the bathroom door close.

* * * * *

Her senses were pervaded with the scent of smoke and roses.

Her body was on fire, hands touching, teasing, almost as if they were under her skin. It was as if she could see fingers moving beneath her stretched flesh.

She reached to meet the fingertips, touching her own skin, brushing her body, feeling the nerves jump. Something warm and wet and liquid electric trickled between her thighs. She could feel strong fingers slide between her folds, teasing at her entrance. She could feel herself rising, her hips instinctively lifting off the sheet to meet and guide the probing digits, her body heat increasing, her arousal reaching fever pitch. She could feel the weight of a body on top of her, craved that feeling, and slipped a finger inside.

And her whole body and soul screamed out. *Striker.*

Her cheeks were wet. She didn't think she could cry any more.

Striker, you stopped me from being afraid. Now I can't feel anything else. I don't know what to do. I don't know how to be without you.

It was 2.30 a.m. Too late to sleep, too early to wake.

The clock ticked, but time had given up passing.

She lay on her side, her face buried in the pillow that still smelt faintly of her lover. She felt stiff material under her fingers. Her father had wanted to take her blood-soaked dress away, but she couldn't part with it. It was rigid with Striker's life.

Her mind was an empty ballroom - echoing with dancesteps of thoughts. There had been a Cinderella once. A prince, tall and dark and beautifully female, who had embraced her, swept her away and turned her head-over-heels in love.

But the other slipper had dropped. And peace and her princess still didn't come.

All she had left was a bloody dress and the faintest scent...

...that brought back the devastation of her desire.

She could still sense Striker in her mouth: the way her release had vibrated against her tongue, the final gush of arousal, tangy, smoky and rich, as it flooded her mouth, the taste of blood....

Her body ached with need, weariness and grief, but it made her unable to rest. She needed to do something, and she thought, briefly, about calling a taxi and going back to the hospital. Taking the Volvo, even....

Torpidly, she played back the events of the afternoon. Her mind's eye saw Striker lying there, blood pooling on the floor around her. She saw Gilbert Lamprey, led away in handcuffs. She heard the brothers' voices from somewhere. She heard Gilbert's velvet tones: *You're the spit of her....*

She remembered the woman in the photograph, so like Striker, but so different too. Striker had asked her to paint her mother.

Nothing I can do....

That thought like a lightning bolt.

Striker had asked her to paint her mother.

She lifted herself out of bed and, still with the dress clutched to her, she tip-toed into Striker's room. It would always be Striker's room, now.

She closed the door and turned on the bedside light. Nothing had changed. Striker's clothes were still piled untidily around her spilling suitcase. The bed had been made, but there was an indentation in the duvet where, perhaps, she'd sat. Morien put a hand to it.

Easey was curled up on the bed. She lifted her head as Morien approached, blinking in the light. Just beyond the little cat was Striker's leather jacket. Morien felt her throat tighten at the sight of it. She found herself sitting by Easey, running a hand over the leather. It still felt warm, as if Striker had only just tossed it on the bed and left the room... just for a moment. It was almost too much to touch it.

Morien went to the suitcase, running her hands over the clothes, the books peeking out from under the material. The back pocket. That was where the secrets were kept. She dipped her hand against the silky lining, her hand immediately touching paper. A lucky dip of Striker's life. It was a bundle of letters, cards, postcards, tied together with ribbon. Morien wondered, for just a moment, whether she was intruding. But she needed to do this. She pulled the bow apart and picked out a card. It had two hugging teddy bears on the front.

The handwriting was neat, careful and easy to read, obviously written with a cartridge pen rather than a simple biro. Written by someone who cared about what she was writing - the way it looked, the way it read.

My darling Rosie,

Thank you so much for your letter. It was such a joy to hear from you. I'm so pleased that you're getting on so well at school. I am so proud of you.

Sentences, paragraphs, mixed up on the sheets of paper:

I have a job. I work as a secretary for a businessman who buys and sells all sorts of things. I put a photo of you on my desk and everybody who passes asks me who you are and says how pretty you are.

And more:

I think you'll like the apartment. It's small, but just the right size for two people. I hope you like your room. You can decorate it any way you like, although I was thinking about trying to find something like the dragon freeze you've got at home. Would you like that? Or would you like something new?

A postcard - a picture of the Tower of London.

I can't wait to bring you here! We can see how it compares to all those castles we read about!

A paragraph from a letter jumped out at her:

Please believe that your father loves you very, very much and is every bit as proud of you as I am. He shouldn't have shouted at you the way he did, that was wrong, but I'm sure that underneath he's very sorry. He's very sad right now and he needs your love as much as you need his.

Another letter:

I miss you so much, darling. I carry your picture round with me. I'm working very hard to get to

see you.

And:

I know it's hard, but Dad and I and the lawyers are trying very hard to sort out when you can come and visit, sweetheart. Sometimes these things take time, because we both love you very much and we want the situation to be the best it can for everybody, but especially you.

Another card:

I've almost got enough money saved for you to come and stay, my love. And just remember, if your father won't let you come here, then I'll come and visit you. Either way I will see you soon, Rosie. I promise.

More and more and more, bundle after bundle of cards and letters, until Morien was surrounded by a sea of paper. And from the patchwork waves, there was always the end:

I love you, my beautiful girl.

All my love, always

Mum xxx

And at last, Morien reached into the suitcase pocket and pulled out the worn copy of *Alice's Adventures In Wonderland*, and the photograph of Judith Bailey West fell into her lap.

She picked it up from where it was resting on the blood-soaked dress and stared at the face. "What happened to you?" she found herself asking out loud. "How does Gilbert Lamprey know you? Did he have something to do with you going missing?" The faded image held its secret. "Your daughter loves you. You would be so proud of her. She's the most amazing person...."

But, now, she couldn't finish that thought.

She looked at Judith's blue eyes, the light in them almost extinguished by time. She wouldn't let that light go out. "I'll find you," she whispered. "If... if she can't, one day I'll find you... for her."

And she got up, gathering the photo and the dress and leaving Easey curled up in a cradle of letters.

* * * * *

It was 5.15 a.m.

Sullivan blinked in the daylight peering through the gap in the curtains, although it hadn't been this that had woken him. He had fallen into a deep sleep when he had finally ensured that his daughter was resting, but was now aware of movement in the house that was more than feline.

He heaved himself out of bed, becoming aware of the light in Striker's room as he opened the door to the landing. But he was drawn downstairs. The sitting room was glowing.

All the lamps were blazing and the morning streamed through the open patio doors. His daughter seemed oblivious of the brightness and his presence. She was standing at her old easel, the frame supporting a canvas. She was sketching: positive, determined strokes from a charcoal pencil decorated the surface. Each time she added another mark, she would caress the line with her thumb, smoothing, changing. It looked like Striker, but....

Her face was so close to the canvas she only needed to purse her lips to kiss the outlined cheeks. However many dark lines she stroked onto the surface, however black the charcoal was, the sketched face seemed to radiate brightness.

On this most despairing of nights, she could only create light.

Every muscle in her body ached. She had been working through pain and exhaustion for hours, but none of that mattered any more. The only thing that mattered was the mark of charcoal on canvas. Lips on skin.

"Morien...."

She jumped and turned. "Dad...."

"How long have you been awake?"

She didn't answer, simply shrugging, then turned back to the canvas, regarding it through half-closed eyes. She added another line, another touch.

"You should really get some sleep, cariad...."

"I can't sleep, dad."

"Rest, at least. This is not resting. Think of your...."

"Please, *don't*.... I *need* to do this."

Sullivan watched another line, another caress. He sighed. "It's amazing, sweetheart. It's going to be just like her."

Morien half-turned, a tiny steel-glint of amusement in her eye. "It's not her, it's her mother." She watched her father's puzzled face as he gazed at the picture. "I promised her I'd do this. I won't let her down on this."

"You've never let anyone down, Mo."

Morien sighed and stood back a little, staring into the black and white eyes on the canvas. "Yes I have. I've let myself down." She looked back at her father. Her own eyes, she knew, were wild, red-rimmed and exhausted. They felt it. "I've let you down. I've let Striker down...."

Sullivan moved over behind his daughter, putting his hands on her shoulders. "You haven't let...."

Her voice was thick with sorrow and self-hatred. "Dad, if I hadn't been so stupid, Striker might be...." Her right hand suddenly jerked, the pencil flying across the room. "Daddy...."

"What's wrong?" He clutched at her shoulders.

She leant back against her father, grateful for his support. She could feel her knees trembling. Her arm jerked again. "Fucking hell!" The expletive was sobbed. "Seizure."

Sullivan felt a wave of panic go through him. He was aware his hands were digging into his daughter's shoulders now. "Do you need to sit down? Do you need to lie down?"

"Sit down... sit down." Sullivan backed them both onto the sofa.

"Do you need anything? A glass of water?" He could feel Morien shaking under his fingers. She was breathing heavily.

"No...." She was crying again. Huge gasping sobs, brought on by physical shock as well as mental anguish. She was losing everything: her sanity, her lover, her body.... If she slipped under this time, if this turned into more than a partial, if she lost consciousness... this time she

didn't want to recover.

She could feel the muscles in her neck stiffening, unsure of whether it was tension or the overtones of a tonic seizure, she tried to move her head and managed to look at the canvas.

Striker, my love, help me. I can't live without you. You make me feel alive. I want to be alive again.

And her entire body went warm.

She was blazing, as she had been in Striker's arms. She was blazing like a fire on a winter's day. She could hear her father say from a distance, "God, Mo, you're burning up..." and everything went black.

An Underground tunnel... pitch black, the breeze strengthening from the oncoming train. But all she could feel was the warmth behind her, and she turned to see a tall woman in t-shirt and jeans - a black leather jacket thrown casually over her shoulder. The woman glanced up and, for eternity, she lost herself in the bluest gaze she'd ever seen.

There was a voice - as she'd always imagined.

Know that you're not alone.

She wasn't alone. She never would be.

Her breathing eased.

It felt as if she had been holding her breath for the entire night, her entire life, and now she could breathe again. She inhaled slowly, taking in the blissful fresh air that was flooding from the tunnel, flooding through the windows.

She opened her eyes.

She had dropped onto the floor, her backside and wrists now feeling the impact of the sudden descent; her body throbbed with the neural rush. The rug was rough beneath her fingers. Through the patio doors she could see Snowflower dancing with a butterfly on the lawn. She took another breath of fresh air.

Then exhaled and turned her head to greet her father's terrified face on the sofa above her. In any other circumstances his expression would have been funny. She reached up a weak hand and rested it on his knee. "It's okay, dad," she said. "I think it's over." She breathed again. "It's over."

She could still feel tears running down her face but they didn't seem to matter any more. Sullivan reached down and she put her arms round his neck, grateful for his presence. And he drew her up into his lap, and held her like a baby.

"Daddy," he finally heard, whispered against his shoulder. "Please take me back."

And he nodded.

Chapter 26: *Giving Up Smoking*³

She had made it through the night.

Morien sat in the passenger seat of the Volvo, listening to the engine muttering about the hour. Her father sat hunched behind the wheel. A dull light reflected onto his spectacle lenses, making them and his thoughts impenetrable. The sun had risen, colourless and subdued behind a bank of cloud. The Welsh countryside glimmered under a covering of dew. Birds wavered between grey sky and green landscape, the haze of purple mountains in the far distance standing vigil.

Everything seemed to be veiled and quiet, unwilling and unable to face the onslaught of the coming day and reality.

She had made it through the night. Her body echoed with pain and exhaustion, but she forced her body out of the car, barely stopping to talk to the doctor, half-running down the now-familiar hospital corridors, as they echoed in turn with her footsteps. Sullivan was left far behind.

These corridors seemed as reverent and still as a church. No, Morien thought, a small, country chapel compared to the cathedral that was St Vincent's. And in her headlong rush she felt as if she was the only living thing remaining.

But she needed to see her... whatever state she was in now, she needed to see her.

By a miracle, she had made it through the night.

It was a quiet room, small, containing only a few beds, making room for equipment. Machines that hissed, machines that beeped, machines that dripped. That morning, beyond the nurse's station, only one bed was occupied, in the corner.

There was a chart at the foot. Not much of it made sense, but one thing caught Morien's eye at the head of the page.

Name: West, Rosamund Sarah Bailey.

Rosamund West. Why had she hidden herself away for so long?

She walked round the bed, conscious of her own heartbeat keeping time with the EEG, conscious that it wasn't that long ago since Striker had crept into her hospital room and watched and wondered. Had she felt like this: so reverential, so in awe, as if she'd come in to confess her sins?

Gently she sat herself down, her head bowed for a moment, and then she reached out and

wrapped her hand round Striker's still fingers.

Her lover's hair seemed so dark against the white of the pillow. Her skin was ashen, as if every drop of blood in her had haemorrhaged through Morien's fingers to stain the floor of the Salem Chapel. Her chest and abdomen were a mass of bandages, too thick to disclose any movement. She looked entombed. Tubes punctured her skin, her arms, snaking past her head like a hidden Medusa. Morien could hear the hiss and click of the machine that supported her breathing. A plastic mask covered her nose and mouth, clouding with air.

She squeezed the hand in hers and opened her mouth, but was suddenly unsure of what to say. Words that had only been part of the drone the night before, this morning, finally came to the fore.

Vascular surgery, they had said. Transfusion. Blood. So much blood. And a lifetime of thoughts and expressions and phrases - procedures, surgery, discussed, dismissed, pursued, imagined, until Morien could feel the scalpel parting her own skin. And all now condensed to a single word.

Critical.

"Hi," she started. "It's me. I.. I..." She took a breath. This was Striker. "How did you do this? How did you do this for someone you didn't even know?" She gazed down at the quiet face. "You're a remarkable person, Rosamund West. But then, you said yourself, you've got a way with more than words." She squeezed her hand again.

Striker was unresponsive. The machine hissed and clicked.

"I took a leaf from your book, though. Almost literally." She pulled a book out of her bag, and held it up for Striker to see. But her eyes remained closed - lashes resting long and dark against her cheeks. "I hope you don't mind."

She placed the book on the edge of the bed and, briefly, brushed her fingers over the worn cover: *Sleeping Beauty and Other Fairy Tales*.

Then she picked a tale.

"Once upon a time, in a country a long way from here, there stood a flourishing city, full of commerce; and in that city lived a merchant so lucky in all his ventures that it seemed as if fortune waited on his wishes."⁴

And to the beat of the cardiograph, the expectant hush of the ventilator, the room bore witness to the merchant's downfall, his beautiful daughter, and the Beast with whom he made a dreadful deal.

The room seemed still quieter as Morien's voice died away on the happy ever after.

She closed the book and put it to one side. Still clutching Striker's hand, she rested her chin on her own outstretched arm simply to watch her lover breathe; watch the breath cloud the mask; willing her chest to rise and fall.

It was still touch and go, they had said. Words bandied around from last night, this morning and in-between still fluttered in her head. *Laparotomy. Organ donation. Love. Miracle....*

Words from a lifetime ago:

"Hello, love, can you hear me? You're in hospital."

"Can you tell how deep that wound is?"

"We almost lost her early this morning," a consultant had murmured at her as she'd made her entrance. "We'd almost given up on her. But her condition started to improve just a little while ago. Nothing we did. She wants to live. She's still unconscious, but she's stable. However, I must warn you, it's still...."

Touch and go....

She touched a finger to an alabaster cheek. In a moment in time, she'd changed from a knight to an Arthurian lady.

My Lady Rosamund.

MY lady... Rosamund.

"Hold on," she whispered.

The EEG beat strongly. The ventilator hissed in regular time.

* * * * *

She soon came to know the hospital as if she was following a thread through a labyrinth. However far she strayed - the canteen, the toilets - she'd always find her way back to Striker's bedside. But she would never stray for long. Mostly she sat by the bed, one hand resting on a motionless arm, the other propping up a sketchpad, a jotter, a book. Sometimes she'd read out loud, sometimes simply to herself, sometimes the book was forgotten on her lap and she'd simply stare at the cool marble of her lover's skin. The gentle planes of her face. She'd talk to her, about everything and nothing. Sweet nothings in the unhearing ear. Ideas, plans, wishes. And all too often she'd find herself drifting off, falling into sleep next to Striker as if she could reach her there. This way, minutes stretched into hours, stretched into... but here time had no meaning.

But she'd find herself awakened by an abrupt Welsh voice, or a soft Welsh voice, depending on the shift. And she'd wait outside, listening to the voices of the consultants and nurses talking in hushed medical tongues. Or she'd find her father waiting to take her home, talking of food and rest and things that didn't seem important.

Home, now, was only a blur of hot restlessness and waking dreams in the dark. Counting each clock tick until it was time to go back to the hospital. In the dawn hours she'd find herself padding downstairs to the sitting room, unveiling the canvas, touching the picture; a mark here, a stroke there. No colour.

No colour in life or art.

But now the room had started to change from the first time the nurse had shaken her awake and shooed her out on that first day of vigil. It was still too quiet, but in that quiet there was a new spring. Vase by vase, almost bud by bud, flowers started to bloom; creeping round the walls, transforming the still church into a living arbour. From Idomeneo, from Kishen, from Drake.... Messages of support, hope, love.

Still too quiet. Just the hiss of the ventilator, the beeping of the EEG.

She took the book out of her bag, flicking through the familiar stories. Such a lot had happened since the American bad girl had turned storyteller for a friendless stranger. She remembered sitting on a train and thinking of her voice before she'd even met her. What was the poem?

Morien closed her eyes and recited:

*"Gweld y more gynta
yw'r agosa yr awn
at ddarganfod gwir ryfeddod.*

*Saif yno'n arlais, i'n didol,
yr amlinell rhwng nef
a daear, gofod a dyfroedd."*

Language like a magic spell.
And a sound beyond the silence.⁵

"Striker?"

The slightest movement under her hand. Fingers slowly curled up to touch her own.

Something mumbled, incomprehensible under the plastic mask.

"Cariad?" She was on her knees now. The EEG picked up the beat, the ventilator wheezing.

Another hand inched up and touched the mask, gripping it just enough for it to move.

And the rusty whisper of a voice, barely more than a movement of cracked lips, allowed a single word.

"Ow."

"Oh God, Striker." Morien's utterance was as tiny as her lover's, muffled by a sound - half-sob, half-chuckle.

And the first light of a blue gaze through half-closed eyelids.

The first glimmer of dawn, as the sun cracked the horizon.

The first slight curve of her mouth as that gaze met green.

And Morien was speechless.

Until....

Striker's hand shook on the mask, fighting against the tough elastic, and for a moment, the opaque plastic obscured her mouth again. The ventilator hissed briefly. And then the fingers moved again, regaining strength for just a short time.

Morien glanced back at the nurses' station. "Should you be doing that?"

There was the tiny flash of humour in the lidded eyes, like brilliance through clouds. "Fuck it."

The nurse was coming. Morien could feel the disturbance in their air.

Striker's mouth moved, a touch of a dry tongue on drier lips. "Where... am I?"

Morien placed a gentle hand on Striker's forehead. It felt lukewarm, clammy... alive. "You're in hospital, my love, in Caernarfon."

Striker's eyes momentarily closed, the mask slipped back over her face. Morien could feel the puzzlement under her fingers, and a jolt of cold worry ran through her. The nurse was at her shoulder. Others entering the room.

"Cariad," she whispered. "You know who I am, don't you?"

The nurse persuaded her to her feet. A doctor took her place at Striker's side.

A single connection left, hands still touching.

And, just for a moment, Striker opened her eyes again. As blue as the sky over the bay. Her

fingers bent under Morien's, a single finger lingered on her palm.

Always, my love, that finger said. Always.

* * * * *

Gentle moments of consciousness. Growing longer. Now time mattered more than anything.

Morien would find herself staring at Striker for hours; just watching and waiting. Roles reversed - the irony wasn't lost on her. Watching her stillness, broken only by the tiny movements of sleep as insignificant and beautiful as cloud-shadows across a dormant land. Watching for the signs of waking - the flex of a muscle, a muffled sigh, a blink... once... twice....

The slightest movement of a tubed arm, and the mask would be pulled off.

"You're still here."

"Where else would I be?"

A breath so deep she almost moved the bandages. "Out havin' fun."

"No fun without you, cariad." Morien clutched her hand to her, cradling it in her own. "How are you feeling?"

Striker looked at her, an eyebrow raised slightly. "Like I've... been shot." She put the mask back on her face, just for a moment, breathing as deeply as she could.

Morien smiled down at her. "Okay, so that was a stupid question."

"Are you okay?"

The question was soft and muffled, but still caught Morien by surprise. "You get shot three times, almost died and you're asking if I'm all right?"

The mask came off again. "Are you?" came out as a wheeze, a noise that made Morien's chest constrict.

"Cariad, please put that back on."

Striker put the mask back on, but her hand grasped Morien's, asking the question that her blue eyes echoed.

"No. I'm not all right. I almost lost you."

Striker lifted Morien's hand, placing it on her own cheek, nuzzling it gently; a strange mixture of soft skin and cold tubing to Morien. But the skin was warm, and Striker was alive. That was all that mattered. She looked down at her love's face: her eyes dark, shuttered rings against white marble.

There was silence in the room again, and again the machines filled the void. But neither woman seemed to hear them.

Morien eventually spoke: "I don't know what to call you anymore."

Striker looked at her, her eyes unfathomable - gauging Morien's thoughts. And then away. The mask covered her face, until: "Striker."

"But your name's..."

"Striker." She struggled for breath. "No one calls me... Rosie anymore." She glanced beyond Morien. The nurse was approaching. Striker held out a hand, wanting just a few more moments alone with Morien and the nurse seemed to relent. She clutched the smaller woman's hand to her, and captured her eyes with her own, needing to explain. "Rosie died twenty two years ago."

Morien's own breath caught in her throat. She closed her eyes, unable to bear the bleakness in Striker's gaze. Unable to bear the thought of the pain this woman had endured over the years. But she remembered what Striker had said just a few days before. Somewhere inside her was that ten-year-old girl. She opened her eyes again, wondering whether to say what she was thinking, unsure of whether it would hurt this woman she loved. She licked her lips and spoke. "You're wrong, you know. Rosie's only been asleep." Striker's brow creased a little, as if she was thinking, as if she was troubled.

Morien continued. "I want to call you Rosie," she said.

Striker seemed to be examining their joined hands; slowly she entwined their fingers. "We'll see," she finally said, and slipped the mask back on her face.

She looked so tired. So pale. So strange that a woman of such height and presence could look so small and fragile. Her eyes drifted shut.

"You need to sleep," Morien said, brushing an errant lock from the damp forehead. There seemed to be an answering smile behind the mask: the laugh lines deepened around Striker's closed eyes. Morien shifted, intent on leaving her to her rest, but Striker still held her hand.

And then that breathy whisper came again, muffled behind the mask. "Morien...."

"Don't speak, cariad, sleep."

A hand came up again, the mask was removed and Striker regarded her from under heavy-lidded eyes. "I love you." A breath. "Just had to say it."

And then the mask was back on, her eyes closed and her face relaxing into slumber. And again Morien watched her, warm breath rising like mist against the plastic covering her mouth.

"Damn it, Rosie... Striker... whatever the hell your name is... you don't half know how to get a girl."

But here, at the end, she couldn't say the same words in return. Not yet. There was something she had to settle first.

She put her head down on the bed - a cheek resting against bandage. Striker didn't smell smoky any more - too clean, too clinical - but still there lingered the faintest scent of musky roses. She closed her eyes and listened to Striker breathing.

* * * * *

Night had risen like a tide.

Morien had fallen asleep on the sofa; her mind full of noise: beeps, hisses, and three words that filled her life, which followed her into her dreams. And each time she opened her eyes - awake or asleep - Striker would be there, until she wasn't sure whether she was in the sitting room in the cottage, the work-in-progress on the easel to one side, or in the Intensive Care Unit next to her lover.

But an alien noise punctured the rhythm, dragging her into alertness and to an upright position.

She got to the phone a few seconds before Sullivan, aware that the call could be from the hospital. *She was getting better, wasn't she?*

"Hello?" Morien said, her voice thick with nerves.

There was nothing but crackle on the line.

"Hello?"

Was that someone breathing? An old, forgotten fear reared up inside.

Another crackle. And then: "Mo... it's me."

Morien paused.

Me? Who the hell was 'me'?

"I've been trying to get hold of you for days. I phoned home, but there was never any reply. What's happened to the answerphone?" The voice was familiar: a soft-plum voice that she remembered from somewhere, some time years ago. "I got hold of Drake in the end. He told me you were spending some time in Lleuadaeth. Are you okay?"

Oh. Morien blinked. Recognition soaked into her like a warm cup of tea. "Sophie?"

"Yes, Mo. Sorry, the line's not brilliant. You sound a little...."

"Where are you?"

"Er... somewhere near Cuzco. Listen, darling, there's been some stuff going on here and I really need to talk to you. But... Mo... I need to know if you're okay. Not being able to get hold of you has really freaked me out."

"I'm fine, Soph, I'm...."

Morien looked up at her father. His face was a soft cloud of concern. He didn't say a word, merely regarded her with a questioning gaze. Heavily, she sat down on the chair.

Crunch time.

"Actually... I'm not all right. So much has happened, I..." She was aware that, despite herself, tears were starting to fall again and her voice was shaking. But she looked at Sullivan, smiling at him reassuringly, and he smiled in return and nodded and turned back upstairs. "Soph, how much time have you got? We really need to talk."

* * * * *

Early morning: the dark still clinging to the corners. She'd woken up in pain and alone. The way the light fell in the room, the mechanical fritinancy, and beyond the sudden patter of raindrops on the windowpane... she was back in London.

Waking up in pain and alone.

The strange underscore of Danny's sound experimentation in the next door bedroom, she would reach for the cigarette packet, the bottle she'd left under the bed, and a book. Fairy stories, myths, poetry... reading to someone in her head - Shakespearean sonnets - dedicating them to her desire, wreathed in smoke and misery.

Or was it Vinnie's? Catching forty winks on the settee in the staff room on a quiet weekday night. Listening to the sounds of the medical world. But something had happened, hadn't it? She'd been woken by the sound of a siren....

A woman, unconscious, close to death.

Half-awake, half-asleep, barely-alive and wondering if the EEG was going to shoot her.

The clack of shoes roused her, and the mental jolt made her cry out with pain, except the sound she made was barely a murmur.

Then there were drugs, and a calm Welsh voice, and daylight coming through the windows. But there was still a part of her that wanted nicotine and alcohol and literature. But most of all...

She wanted Morien very much.

Her body was asleep; numb from the waist up. It was hard to move her arms. The tubes that attached her to the various pieces of medical equipment felt like chains. But her mind seemed to be painfully awake.... Aside from the hisses and beeps, and the familiarity of a waking hospital, she kept hearing voices, sirens, gunshots. Morien whispering her name... except it wasn't Morien. "Rosie," the voice said. "Rosie."

Nurses would come in and out (or maybe it was Striker who came in and out). Some would be chatty - if they saw she was awake. Some would be informative. Some would be quiet - if they thought she was asleep. They would bring soothing words and medical equipment and more flowers and doctors....

More drugs.

She must have been asleep for hours.

Or minutes.

Or days.

How long had it been now?

Time to cut out the hard stuff, fuck-up.

She gathered her strength, and pulled the mask over her head, merely holding the plastic in her hand, if she needed it. No more dependencies...

Except... She held the mask to her mouth.

There was a quiet and gentle bustle at the door. Friendly greetings passed at the nurses' station.

An auburn vision with a smile like sunrise.

The room suddenly seemed brighter.

Morien felt like running to her when she saw Striker, overjoyed to see her already awake. She was propped up, the head of the bed had been raised slightly, and pillows stacked beneath the patient's head and shoulders. She still seemed gaunt and pale, as if she was in shadow. As if she was still bathed in the dark light of an Underground station, shades playing across her skin.

But the sparkle in her eyes was pure summer sky.

She moved forward struggling not to throw her arms, and thus her baggage, round the sick woman.

As if seeing her dilemma, slowly, Striker reached out a hand to Morien, and Morien grasped it, but the blue eyes moved to the bags Morien was clutching. She removed the mask. "Watcha got?" she asked. Her voice was still a rough whisper, but the tone was unmistakable Striker.

"Nice to see you too," Morien said, and taking advantage, she bent down and gave Striker a lingering kiss on the cheek.

Her eye was caught by a new vase of flowers standing on a table near the bed: a rainbow of carnations, chrysanthemums and freesias.

"Who are they from?"

Striker fumbled, finally plucking the little florist's card from where it rested by the pillows, and Morien understood why she kept it there. The two-word message would have meant the world to her lover. It simply said: *Satta, sis.*

Morien smiling, carefully placed it back by the pillows where Striker could see it.

"What does that mean?" she asked, sitting, trapping a hand.

"Relax... chill."

Satta. It meant she was all right. They were all right. There was nothing to worry about. It meant she had one of the best friends... no, *two* of the best friends a woman could have.

It meant Morien was here.

"They're beautiful," Morien said, but she was looking at the light in Striker's eyes as she said it.

But then she let go of Striker's hand, and reached down to the plastic carrier bag that had come to rest under the chair. Carefully, she drew out a single hydrangea bloom. "Mr Maguire called me over as I left the house, handed me this."

Striker looked shocked. Puzzled. "Mr Maguire?"

Morien smiled. "Do you think it'll fit in here?" She tucked it into the closest vase, where it contrasted handsomely with the other flowers. "Oh, and I ought to warn you, Mrs Jenkins is knitting you a bed jacket."

"What?" Striker almost choked. Morien gripped her hand as she took deep breaths from the mask.

"Don't worry. It'll probably be very tasteful. And pink. She wasn't sure of the size, so she'll most likely get Dad to try it on first."

Striker spluttered into the mask, and Morien caught a hiss from beneath: "Don't make me laugh. Please don't make me laugh."

Morien gave Striker a moment to recover before saying, "I've got some other stuff too." She reached into her tapestry bag, pulling out a pile of papers. "That's from Dai News." She placed a neatly folded copy of *USA Today* on the table. "It's actually *USA Yesterday*, we always were a bit slow up here. And this arrived this morning." She handed Striker an envelope, which the invalid opened with numb fingers. Inside was a card showing a fine art print and pronouncing best wishes from Drake and Kerensa and *Get well soon, because we want to meet you properly.*

"And there's this...." Morien opened this envelope, to Striker's relief. Another card showing a cartoon cat tucked up in bed. Inside was written, in a spider-like, teacher's hand, a greeting that made her breath catch:

To a woman with real guts

Get well and come home soon,

Sullivan x

"And this is from Dad, too," Morien continued. She handed Striker a pile of what looked like computer hardcopy. "That's right, isn't it? Philadelphia Phillies? He used one of the school computers and printed as much as he could off their website: news and results and match reports...." She looked at Striker, expecting an answer, but was startled to see her crying. "Striker?"

"I don't believe it," her voice barely a whisper almost lost in her breathing. "Everyone's so...." She winced in pain as a sob shook through her.

"Hey...." Morien reached forward, gently, resting her cheek against Striker's shoulder. Placing a gentle hand over her arm. "It's okay. You're a hero, you know?"

Striker shook her head, a tubed hand covering her face.

"Striker, you saved me. In so many ways. You'll always be my hero." Morien reached up and removed the hand from Striker's face, kissing the palm. "My protector." Another kiss. "My knight in worn-out sneakers." Another kiss. "Besides... I haven't finished yet." Again she reached into her bag. "I brought you some books.... I thought you'd like to read." A couple of paperback novels from Morien's own collection, Striker's copy of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, and a book of Shakespeare's Sonnets were placed carefully on the table.

This woman was a miracle....

"And this...." She fished into the carrier again and brought out a red rosebud. "It's not as impressive as the other flowers, but I saw it in the garden and...."

Striker looked at her: green catching blue. Tears were still running down her face. They seemed to be doing that a lot lately. She clutched the rose in her hand.

"It's beautiful, I love it," she whispered. "I love you."

Morien smiled, feeling like crying herself. "I took the thorns off. I didn't want you to...."

Too much blood had been spilled. Too much sleeping had been done.

Striker took a few breaths with the mask. Then, "Morien...."

There was a pause, which made Morien worry. Striker couldn't meet her eyes.

"Tell me they got them," the whisper finally came.

"No one told you?"

She shook her head.

"They got them."

Striker closed her eyes and seemed to sink further into the pillows.

"It's over, cariad, you needn't worry."

"No it's not," was the hushed reply.

Morien caught her unveiling gaze and held it. "You can't contact him."

Striker looked away, lost in the rose's closed petals.

"You'll be a witness against him. It could prejudice the case if you did."

The slightest twist of her mouth.

"Striker, this man is ultimately responsible for everything that happened - to Danny, to the Boom Shack...."

And Striker's lips moved. "Pully." And there was tiniest ghost of a nod. A sigh that seemed to have come from the ventilator, had it not been for the telltale slump of Striker's head.

Morien pulled her chair even closer. Her tone was light when she spoke. "But who says we need Gilbert Lamprey? There's always electoral rolls."

"For which region." It was less a question and more the resigned statement of someone who had been there, thought of that.

"How about the online register? That covers the whole country."

Striker glanced at her. "I can't... get on it."

Morien lifted an eyebrow. "Maybe not, but you might know someone who can. I don't know... someone who works for a council, say...."

Striker's eyes widened. "Morien...?"

"There's no guarantee...."

"I know...."

"But maybe... we'll get a lead...."

"A lead...."

"But only when you're better. When we're *home*."

It seemed to take a conscious effort for the American to tamp down her excitement. But then she seemed to relax into the pillows, almost for the first time. She smiled, took a breath, and looked around at the gestures of strangers, acquaintances, friends... her lover.

Home? *I think I am home.*

She sniffled, then her lips twisted into a wry smile. "Nothing from Dean."

"Dean?" Morien's forehead creased as she frowned. "Dean *Powell*? What's he got to do with

anything?"

"Doesn't matter."

The EEG beeped.

The ventilator hissed.

Finally, Morien spoke.

"Striker... I've been talking to Sophie."

There was a long pause. Suddenly, Striker seemed to find the EEG's screen very interesting. "How's she doing?" she asked.

"She's fine. We had a long chat, sorted a lot out. It was good to talk to her."

"Good," Striker said. Her voice was high, and breathless. She rolled the rose stalk between her fingers, holding it as if it was a cigarette, and hoped that Morien couldn't see her hands shaking.

Morien's eyes twinkled - little flashes of inner starlight in the deep green sea. "She's met someone."

Striker's head spun round, her mouth fell open.

"She's getting married," Morien continued.

"What?!"

"His name's Arturo."

"Arturo?" Striker felt the breath she'd been holding bubble loose and she winced as she stifled a ridiculously girlish giggle.

"I know, even Sappho was married. He's a local artist. He helps local children find themselves through art."

"It certainly worked on Sophie." Striker said in an ebullient exhalation. Suddenly, she couldn't seem to stop grinning.

Morien laughed. "I told her about you."

"You did?" Striker's grin faded.

Morien took back one of Striker's hands, and slowly drew little, teasing circles on her palm. "I told her I was in love with you."

The EEG beeped.

The ventilator hissed.

A warmth spread through Striker's body that she'd never known before. Suddenly she felt as if she could breathe unassisted. Suddenly, she felt like tap dancing round the ward.

But the slightest attempt at movement reminded her that she'd been shot three times.

And that she'd never taken tap dancing lessons.

Her chest was heaving, the EEG was skipping, the nurse at the station was looking worried, and she could feel her own ridiculously big smile stretching her face.

She took a breath: "You are?"

"Mmm hmm. I'm crazy about you."

Striker slammed the mask back on her face, gasping for breath, but shining blues never losing contact as Morien threw her head back and laughed a laugh of total joy.

"Hey, sweetie," Striker breathed at last.

"Yeah?" Morien's eyes crinkled at the endearment and caressed Striker's hand with her thumb.

"Say 'Arturo' again."

"Arturo."

"Again..."

"Arturrrrrrrro..."

The sigh this time was one of pure contentment. Striker couldn't resist reaching up and touching a soft auburn lock with a finger. Running another down the line of Morien's cotton headscarf. It was navy again... this time with small red roses round the edge. But none so beautiful as her own lady of flowers.

"You're weird," her lady smiled. "I can't believe you're getting off on me saying my ex-girlfriend's fiancé's name."

"Your fault... for sounding the way you do." The rose positively waltzed between Striker's fingers.

Morien leaned forward, her mouth tantalisingly close to Striker's ear. Her lips tickled Striker's

earlobe as she said, "There's a much nicer name I could say."

"Yeah?"

"Rosamund."

Striker closed her eyes.

"Rrrrrrosamund."

Striker gave a breathy groan. "You trying to kill me?"

"That's not funny."

Striker smiled. Her eyelids dipped. Morien reached out and stroked a lock of dark hair from her pale forehead, and watched as the blue gaze drifted shut. As inevitable as sunset.

"It's a beautiful name."

"Thank you."

Morien pulled back and Striker opened her eyes only to lose herself in the tenderness that was shining in her lover's gaze.

But sleep was coming, and she fought against it, even though she knew Morien would be there - gentle, sweet, loving - when she woke up again. There was one last thing to say. Something she'd wanted to say from the beginning. She took a deep breath from the mask. "Morien, I've been thinking...."

"What?" Morien looked worried.

"Maybe this is crazy..." a breath, "...after all that's happened. But I want to start again."

"What do you mean start again?"

"I mean...." She clutched Morien's hand in her own and took a gulp of air. After all they had been through together, how could this still be so terrifying?

She looked Morien in her beautiful deep-ocean eyes.

"Hi," she said, "my name is... Rosamund West. I've seen you around and... and I think you're... so beautiful. I was wondering... maybe... if you'd like to come out with me some time?"

THE END

For now.

¹ A line from the song "Constellation of the Heart" by Kate Bush.

² In The Mabinogion tale, "Branwen, Daughter of Llyr", following her disgrace in Ireland, Branwen trains a starling to deliver a message to her brother in Wales

³ The title of the sweet Wendy Cope poem of love conquering cigarettes.

⁴ Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch again. This time 'Beauty and the Beast'.

⁵ For a translation, please see Chapter 2. It starts, "Our first sight of the sea...".

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