

20

YEARS

A NOVEL

LATER

E. J. NEWMAN

20 YEARS LATER



E.J. NEWMAN

E.J. Newman was born in a tiny coastal village in Cornwall, south west England, during one of the hottest summers on record. Four years later she started to write stories and never stopped until she penned a short story that secured her a place at Oxford University to read Experimental Psychology. She now lives in Somerset with her husband, her son, and her books, where all are loved dearly. She runs her own copywriting business and a free short story club at her blog Post-Apocalyptic Publishing at www.eneuman.co.uk.

*“For my grandparents, both here
and on the other side,
but especially for my Nana,
who always believed in me.”*

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PROLOGUE

London wasn't always a dusty, ghost-filled monument to the dead. It was once an intense city with toxic air and the constant din of millions of people talking, consuming, shoving past each other. Perhaps it's impossible for you to imagine so many people alive in this place but, I assure you, it's true. After all, where do you think all the bones littering the streets came from? Each one of the skulls you step over every day was once a person, alive as you are now, and that skull was filled with dreams and fears just like yours. Terror was probably the last thing all those poor souls felt. God knows it was for me.

I can only guess that you're in London, unless this book has had its own adventure too. For a moment more, indulge me, I like to try to imagine who you are. Of course, I can only make some educated guesses. It's likely that you're older rather than younger, as so few children read now. But perhaps you are young, and if so, you must have one of the survivors caring for you, someone kind enough to teach you how to read now that there are no schools. I hope so, it makes you one to treasure.

Perhaps you're trying to decide whether to burn this book now or read it first. Are you weighing up which is more important to you: a few more minutes of heat or the hours of another person's voice reaching up to you from these pages?

Wait! Let me speak to you, let me tell you this tale! Don't you want to know about the Red Lady's rise to power, or perhaps how she fell? Have you heard the name "Joshua" whispered in dark places and wondered what exactly he did? Or is it David the King who fascinates you? No, what am I thinking? It must be the Four you want to know about, the four who changed the world. Well, I was there, watching as it all happened, so if you

burn this now, you'll never know.

I shall start after It happened, some twenty years later, when London was divided between the gangs: the Gardners, the Bloomsbury Boys, the Red Lady's Hunters, to name but a few. Yes, I shall start in the place where it all began: Miri's garden.

You may not have heard of her, but one of the most important people you need to know about is Miri. In the year I begin this account, she was in her forties. I'd like you to try to picture her, hair long and dark with some silvered strands. Some of the lines around the edges of her large brown eyes were no doubt left by the horrors she experienced when It happened, but most of them were carved by smiles.

Miri's garden, at the centre of Queen Square, Bloomsbury, was one of the most beautiful places in London. Not dangerous and wild like the big public parks with their beasts and thorns, and not overgrown like the small house gardens are now. Well kept and orderly, Miri's garden kept her and many others alive.

Her home was part of an old school with arched windows where the housemaster once resided. The other choices were old offices [too impersonal] or one of the hospitals that surrounded the square, but nothing on this earth would make Miri step into a hospital for a second time since It happened, let alone live in one.

The old schoolmaster's house was where her son, Zane, was born and raised. Ah! I can imagine your eyes widen and hear you say: "Yes, I've heard of him!" Well, yes, of course, everyone alive has but, at this point, very few knew of Zane. He learnt about the healing arts at her side, which is why I start with her. Without Miri, there would have been no Zane as you know of him.

Zane was always a sensitive child, with his mother's dark, soulful eyes and the thick brown hair of her youth, uncut since

the day he was born. At the time I have in mind, he was almost fifteen and his hair reached his lower back. He was becoming a handsome young man, so yes, everything you might have heard about him in that regard is certainly true.

At that age he knew very little of life outside the garden, but despite everything his mother did to protect Zane, his innocence was still taken from him. Not by one dramatic event, but gently, like each day steals one's youth. The first little piece was stolen the night the Giant came.

Chapter 1

THE GIANT

On the night Zane first saw the giant, the summer moon was almost full. A figure approached Miri's house slowly and fearfully, keeping well within the shadows and ducking behind anything nearby whenever the clouds parted. The visitor crept up to the house and paused, looking carefully at both ground floor windows several times before finally making a choice. Standing on tiptoe, he cast one more fearful look around the shadowed square before tapping insistently on the glass.

After a few moments, Zane opened the window as quietly as he could, held up a lit candle and peered down with sleepy eyes.

The trespasser bounced on his tiptoes. "Hullo!" he whispered.

Zane smiled at the Bloomsbury Boy standing in front of him. "Hi Dev, what's wrong? It must be the middle of the night." The candlelight shone off Dev's teeth revealing the large gap between the front two. Even though it was only illuminated by one candle, Dev's shock of unruly hair was clearly bright ginger.

"Come with me," he whispered. Dev was shaking, as if scared as well as excited. The Bloomsbury Boys' territory was only five minutes to the west from Miri's garden, in Russell Square, but Dev rarely came over at night.

"But it's dark!" Zane said, looking past Dev. The garden in the square, so familiar in the daylight, looked forbidding. His mother never let him go out alone once the sun had set, and that had never bothered him at all. The routine was always the same; packing up tools half an hour before sunset, then filling three buckets of water from the pump in the garden.

Once everything was safely inside, she had taught Zane to go to every door and window in the house, locking and checking each one, before lighting candles in the kitchen and living room. It was then Zane's responsibility to ensure that all of the curtains were closed perfectly, lest the candlelight shone out of a gap into the darkness. He had never asked why, it was just the way things were. Unlocking the window to talk to Dev had been bad enough, the thought of climbing out and into the moonlit garden was just ... absurd.

"But you got to come with me! I seen sommat ... sommat weird ..."

Dev's apparent agitation stopped Zane from sending him away. "What do you mean by 'weird'?"

"A light ... in one of the windows, high up. I saw it. Was like it was movin' too."

Zane was fully awake in an instant. "A fire!"

"No, not fire. I know what that looks like, an' it weren't that. It weren't like nothin' I ever seen before. Weird light ... we got to check it out, might be sommat important, we got to keep you and Miri safe. An' I don't wanna wake Jay up, in case it's sommat ... stupid." Dev hung his head, recalling the last time that had happened. "You're clever. I thought you should come look-see too. Jay'd be dead chuffed if you did."

Zane considered this carefully. Within the Bloomsbury Boys, a strict hierarchy was in place. Jay, at the top, was the biggest, the one who had lived the longest and the one who had survived most fights with the Gardners. He could also be charming when he needed to be. Miri had once said he had Irish blood in him but Zane looked carefully the next time Jay was cut and his blood looked just like everyone else's.

The only ways that a boy could impress Jay were to either fight a Gardner up close and win, or get a Token, a physical trophy to prove a Boy's ability to steal from the enemy in their own territory and get away afterwards. Tokens earned

a Boy status within the gang: the more Tokens, the more respect and the better claim to food, the ultimate Token being the black tie of a dead Gardner.

Dev, approaching fourteen (a guess, as none of the Boys knew when they were born and didn't mark birthdays), didn't have the dexterity or coordination to survive close combat with a Gardner and mercifully knew that fact. Unfortunately, he also didn't have the luck or the wits to be able to obtain any other Token, and every day had to watch Boys much younger and smaller rise higher in Jay's estimations. Jay was the axis upon which Dev's world turned and Miri had patched Dev up several times after varied attempts to win his favour.

Zane frowned. "If there is something weird there, it might be dangerous." He took a deep breath. "I suppose it's up to us to make sure this isn't a threat, right?"

Dev beamed at him. "Too right!"

Zane and Dev stood outside of the hospital at the far corner of the square. His house couldn't be seen from here, the line of sight intersected by the dark garden.

Zane shook his head. "I'm not going in there."

Dev, a good six inches shorter, looked up at him with large hazel eyes. "Go on, honest-like it'll be worth it, you ain't seen nothin' like what I saw, you wanna see it too. Your Mum won't know; she's asleep."

Zane tensed as pride tugged at a string in his stomach. "It isn't my Mum I'm worried about," he lied.

In Zane's life, the rule to *Never Go Into Hospitals* was as fundamental as *Don't Touch The Fire* and *Wash Your Hands Before You Clean The Wound*. Miri had instilled him with not only a respect for nature, but also a pathological fear of the dark concrete buildings that lined the square. It hadn't taken much; only a few cautionary warnings, a tearful reprimand when she had found him entering the lobby to look for fuel on

a bitterly cold day, but the *Never Go Into Hospitals* rule was proving hard to break.

“Then you must be scared,” Dev stuck out his chin as a clear challenge.

Zane thrust his shaking hands into his pockets and stood straighter as Dev pulled his favourite woolly hat out of his pocket and jabbed his hair under it. The ginger fuzz defiantly poked out of several holes across the crown as Dev meticulously tucked in wayward strands away from his forehead and ears. Everything that Dev wore had holes, like all of the other Bloomsbury Boys. The skill of the well-dressed Boy was to make sure that each thin layer had its holes in different places. Lots of layers not only kept out the cold, but also made them look stouter than they were. It no longer worked on Zane as he and Miri had dressed too many wounds on their scrawny arms and legs to be fooled by such a simple trick.

Dev took a deep breath, drew himself up to his full height as he faced the double doors and strode towards them.

Zane’s clammy hands clenched deep in his pockets. The old glass of the doors was filthy and cracked, beyond them the hospital was as black as the inside of a poppy. He read the words on the faded blue sign hanging lopsidedly over the door. “National Hospital for Nee-ur-ology and Nee-ur-osurgery,” he sounded out softly as Miri had taught him.

Dev, trying to seem braver than his clever and more handsome friend, reached out with shaking hands and pushed the doors open. He and Zane wrinkled their noses at the stale air that wafted out, carrying a fine dust on it that made Dev cough slightly.

Inside the lobby fingers of moonlight began to tentatively pick their way across the floor. A thick layer of dust covered everything in sight with gentle undulations immediately recognisable from some of the alleyways between the garden and the Boys’ square. Bones.

Zane swallowed hard, not noticing that both he and Dev were holding their breath. Their eyes darted around the space, taking in the strange looking doors, how so many things were broken. Internal windows and doors had been smashed and many were hanging off their hinges. Strange wheeled beds were further in, some blocking a corridor in their haphazard arrangement. There were many things neither of them had seen before: signs, symbols on the walls, fire extinguishers, faded and grubby posters from the time before It happened.

A large, rotting staircase was at the farthest point ahead of them, but it was blocked by several pieces of furniture that had been used as some kind of makeshift barricade. Two pillars that were once white stretched up to the ceiling, now grey and streaked with dirt. To the right was a large reception desk, the wood intact, thanks to Miri keeping the Boys out of the hospitals too. Any other building and it would have been scavenged and burnt a long time ago. To the far right, Zane caught a glimpse of an attractive woman with short blonde hair looking out from a painting. He stared at her for a long moment, until Dev finally moved forward, taking a step inside.

Zane followed close behind him, both still enraptured by the alien space but also the sheer sense of adventure. He jumped as the door began to swing closed behind them, and paused to brace it open with an old clipboard he found on the floor near his feet.

“We need the light,” Zane whispered.

Dev frowned. “We need to find another way up,” he whispered back, with a slight tremor in his voice. “Them stairs are no good.”

Zane looked around for another way out of the lobby and saw a sign reading “Stairs to upper floors” with an arrow pointing to the right.

“This way.”

“How’d you know?”

Zane pointed at the sign and began to move forward. His illiterate friend shrugged and fell in behind him, stepping where Zane stepped as Jay had taught him to do when exploring new places.

They clambered over the bones and wreckage, taking care not to touch anything unless they absolutely needed to do so. The corridor to the right was extremely dark; the moonlight could only penetrate so far in, and at several points they could only progress by touch alone. It was only by chance that Zane leant against a door out of the corridor that swung open to reveal a stairwell, lit by moonlight streaming weakly through a skylight high above them. It was sufficient to sketch out the shape of the stairs stretching up above them and the door to the first floor.

“It were four windows up, where I saw it, and on the other side,” Dev whispered. Zane nodded in response, gritting his teeth to stop them chattering. It meant that the light would be impossible to see from the garden or their house.

As carefully and as quietly as possible, they both began to climb the steps. It was slow work, as the steps were also blanketed by the awful grey dust and many of them were littered with bones and skulls. They were careful not to send any crashing down the stairwell. Both boys were used to seeing remains bleached by the sun on the roads that hadn’t been cleared by Miri or the Bloomsbury Boys, but somehow the darkness and the knowledge that they really shouldn’t be inside this place conspired to make it scary to step over them here.

Zane counted the doors as they went up and thankfully the dim blue-grey light got slightly stronger the further up they went. Finally, he stopped outside the door to the third floor. A small round window was set into it and he stood on his tiptoes to peer through. A long corridor with many doors leading off it on both sides could just be made out through the filthy glass. It

was also very dark.

He turned back to Dev. "Can't see anything."

"It'll be further along, the window was in the middle."

There was an awkward pause. "Shall we go and have a look?"

Dev nodded. "Come this far ..."

He stepped in front of Zane and slowly pushed the door open. It creaked as if it hadn't been opened for years and they both froze.

Nothing happened.

Dev let out the breath he hadn't realised he was holding and stepped through. A large murky window at the far end of the corridor let in enough moonlight for them to progress. Their shoulders hunched with tension, they both began to creep down the silent corridor, their footsteps muffled by the thick carpet of dust. Thankfully, there seemed to be fewer bones up here.

The clouds outside cleared and the grey-blue light strengthened into silver, describing the streaks of dirt on the window as it reached through. In that moment, Zane saw something that made him grab Dev's shoulder, half to stop him but half out of fear. With a shaking hand, he pointed out the large footprints in the dust that lay from a door at the other end of the corridor and led up to one of the doors just to their left. Only one set. Whoever had made them was still in that room.

In that moment, they both heard a strange rasping sound, like someone struggling to breathe in the winter after running in the cold. Only it wasn't entirely like that; it was slow and it had an edge to it. There was something odd about the exact regularity of the breaths and a slight click that sounded as it changed from intake to out breath. It came from the same room that the footprints led up to.

As they both turned to the door, the crack beneath it was suddenly illuminated by a bright yellow light that spilled out

from underneath and into the corridor to fall over their shoes. Zane and Dev clutched at each other wildly, but the light faded just as quickly as it had appeared. They finally began to relax but froze again when the the light returned and the door handle started to turn.

A footfall with a heavy metallic clang made them both jump, the shock spurring both of them to back away from the door as it swung open. Both boys gasped at the figure emerging from the room. He was huge, at least seven feet tall, but what drained the colour from their faces was the shape of the Giant's head. It was as wide as his shoulders, like a huge square sat on top of his frame. The Giant lurched out of the room as if his feet were made of iron and turned to face the boys. Before they could make out any features on his huge face the bright yellow light swung around to shine on them. Dazzled, they both shrieked in terror and sprinted down the corridor back to the stairwell.

They hurtled through the door and raced down the first flight of steps as the heavy footfalls approached and the yellow light burst through the round window above their heads. They listened to the bizarre breathing as the Giant approached. He stopped on the other side of the door and both boys held their breath, hoping desperately that he wouldn't come into the stairwell after them. After agonised seconds of tense listening to the regular, horrible wheeze, they both sagged as they heard him walk away in the opposite direction. The steady, slow, clanking footsteps grew quieter as the light swept away from their door.

Chapter 2

THE NEW BOY

A long time ago, Russell Square, the heart of the Bloomsbury Boys' territory, had a garden in the middle of it just like Miri's square. But since the Boys had claimed it, the garden had gradually died, unable to withstand the constant assault of small, destructive children. When his predecessor had died, Jay ordered it cleared of the last big shrubs to give a clear view across at all times. Now all that was left was a few stubborn trees, tattooed with the markings of every Boy who had lived there.

The concrete area in the centre, where a fountain once entertained small children before it happened, was where the Boys tended to gather. News was exchanged there and the spoils of scavenging were pooled and inspected and fought over. On the mud around the concrete area they kept bits of metal, piles of junk too big to put easily anywhere else after having been cleared out of the rest of the square.

There was also a small fleet of rusting shopping trolleys that provided hours of amusement. None of the Boys had any concept of what they'd originally been designed for, so for every Boy they had only one purpose: racing, with one Boy inside and two to push. The shopping trolleys, or "Wheelies" as the Boys called them, had been responsible for three broken arms, two sprained wrists and countless scrapes and cuts. All of these injuries had been carefully cleaned, set, and bandaged by Miri as she listened to a detailed account of who had smashed into whom and who had won. Not even a broken arm would stop a race.

Almost the entire gang had gathered to hear what Dev had to say after he'd come running into the square yelling for

Jay. Zane had waited at the edge to be invited into the territory, and Grame waved him in, also eager to see what the commotion was about. Zane hung back, giving Dev the spotlight as the Boys drifted in to surround him. Dev's eagerness to impress them and raise his profile was palpable.

"He was twice as tall as you Jay, and at least three times wider ... and he couldn't breathe proper-like, he sounded like Tim after he runs lots -"

"Hey!" Tim protested, admittedly one of the shortest and weakest of the Boys. The rest of them sniggered.

Jay had been rubbing the sleep from his eyes when Dev and Zane reached him. Zane had persuaded his friend to wait until dawn before going back to report to Jay, knowing of his bad temper when woken too early. Dev tried to catch his breath and calm down before starting, giving the others a chance to collect around him. The only ones not there were those on watch, but they would soon be filled in.

Jay stood a head taller than the rest of the Boys, even Grame and Mark. It was this, and his thick black hair that he liked to shape into short messy spikes, that made him so easy to spot when the Boys were all together. When the Boys looked up at Jay, they stood straighter, and he only needed to shout "Oy!" once to make any of them stop whatever they were doing and come running if he wanted it. The gang leader walked with the swagger of a young man who knew he was on top. Never afraid to make and hold eye contact, he had the cockiness of one who could fight well and knew it.

A vast array of items adorned the young leader's wiry body. First was his belt, made of several thin black ties plaited together. Then his jacket, made of faded and scuffed black leather, with a variety of patches, some fabric, some metal, sewn over various holes left by different knife fights. Zane's mother had stitched on several of them, usually after sewing up the wound acquired at the same time. On the inside of that

jacket was a collection of small metal badges coveted by all of the other Boys. Jay gave them out as a special reward whenever he felt a Boy should be publicly lauded. Almost all of the Boys had at least one; Grame and Mark both had ten each. Dev had none.

Two knives hung off Jay's hips. They had worn handles and battered sheaths but Zane knew that the blades were sharpened every day. Jay had a spot in the square where he liked to do that, opposite the main barricade at the top of Montague Street, the place where the Gardners attacked the most. His pale blue eyes, framed by long black lashes, stared at that point where he had personally killed several Gardners with the very knives he was sharpening. All the Boys knew never to disturb Jay when he scraped the metal with his special stone, for when he was doing that, all Jay saw was Gardners and blood. When they were sharp enough, Jay would trace a finger lightly over the flat of the blades, still staring at that point, his lips curving into a smile that made anyone who saw it shiver and hurry away.

Jay concentrated on Dev's tale, but when he finished his eyes flicked to Zane.

"This all true?"

Zane hesitated before replying. "He was really big." He wanted to be truthful but not to discredit his friend who had exaggerated slightly.

"Bigger than Luthor?" Jay was frowning. Luthor, the largest Hunter of the Red Lady's gang and the one she called her Champion, was very tall and very strong, setting Jay's standard for "people to be concerned about."

"Oh, much, much bigger than Luthor," Zane replied with certainty and a ripple of wonder spread through the circle of Boys.

Dev sighed in frustration. "I told you he was, Jay, honest-like!"

Jay frowned. "But he didn't follow you?" Both boys shook their heads. "And you didn't see him in Miri's square afterwards?"

"Nothin'!" Dev confirmed. "Was like he disappeared. Outside the hospital we couldn't see anythin' of him or them weird feet of his."

"We could see footprints in the hospital," Zane explained, "but all the dust blows about outside, so we don't know which way he went."

Jay looked down at one of the smallest Boys who tugged at his jacket hem. He leant down and the sandy-haired Boy whispered into his ear. Jay nodded and straightened up. "Seb here's got a good question. How did the Giant have a light that wasn't fire?"

The gang murmured as Seb looked proud. Zane and Dev shrugged in unison.

"Maybe he put some fire in a jar like we do when it's windy," Mark proposed, scratching his lank brown hair.

Zane shook his head. "It didn't look like that. It was too bright, and not shaped like a jar either. It was a perfect circle."

The murmuring increased. "Maybe the Giant caught the sun in a bottle," one of the younger ones called out from the back.

"Nah," Dev said, "would've been hot, and it weren't."

No more theories were forthcoming. Jay kept frowning and that made the Boys nervous. "Grame, Mark, we need double shifts tonight, and everyone needs to stay sharp, ya hear?" All assembled nodded, even Zane, who then blushed. "Anyone hears anything weird, or sees anything weird, come to me right away."

"Even if it's Dev?" one of the Boys quipped. They all sniggered again, apart from Dev and Jay.

"Shut it," Jay said and silence fell. "No messin'. This is serious. Maybe them Gardners have got sommat goin' on with the Giant, so we need to stay smart-sharp. Got it?"

There were few things that Jay took more seriously than the threat from the Gardners. Named after their matriarch's surname and that of her three sons, the Gardners attacked his Boys at any opportunity. Brutal, ruthless and cruel, with a territory boundary that expanded and contracted according to Ma Gardner's daily whims, they were always on Jay's mind.

Dev watched Jay closely, like a hungry puppy hoping for scraps from a table.

"Now scarper you lot. Check the square and the edges of the territory. No wheelie racin' or fightin' 'til I got the all-clear. Go on then!" The Boys scattered to all of the places they knew to check, but Jay grabbed Dev's collar and held him back. "Nice one, Dev."

Dev grinned as he saw Jay reach into his jacket and pull out a badge. "Ta Jay!" He scampered off after beaming a gap-toothed smile at Zane.

Jay turned to Zane. "Your mum know about this?"

Zane looked down at his scuffed shoes, his dark hair falling to hide his guilty face. "You know how she is about hospitals."

Jay nodded, remembering the last time some of his Boys had been caught trying to pilfer old mattresses from the hospital on the corner of Miri's square. He wouldn't have believed their story if she hadn't marched them over herself to hold him to account. "She should know though. If I were in her shoes, I'd wanna know."

Zane sighed. "I know, I –"

He was cut off by three sharp whistles from the north-east corner of the square. Jay took off at a sprint with Zane following close behind. It was some kind of alert, but not a full-blown Gardner alarm.

"Jay! Jay!" A Boy called Smudge (because of a small birthmark on his forehead) was waving frantically for his attention. He was pointing at a low wall in front of one of the abandoned houses. "Another boy, a new one! Behind that wall!"

Jay ran and peered over, then vaulted it effortlessly. Zane hurried over, eager to help, tying his long hair back out of the way in case he was needed.

Huddled against the wall, shivering and deathly pale was a scrawny boy with very short mousy brown hair. He was dressed in the strangest clothes: thin pale blue cotton pyjamas, almost pristine in condition, no patches or holes and hardly any dirt. Zane shuddered when he saw him, not knowing why.

"Hey there," Jay said. His voice was soft and calming and the little boy lifted his head. "I'm Jay, this here's my patch, but boys are allowed to stay so you're alright." As he spoke, the boy visibly relaxed, and Jay slipped off his leather jacket to place it gently around his shoulders. He seemed to notice something as he did so, and beckoned Zane over. "Come look-see, Zane. I reckon he's hurt."

Zane clambered over the wall and went to Jay's side. The little boy's eyes widened when he saw him, and the trembling started again.

Zane knelt down to his level and, just like his mother would, he smiled warmly at the boy, even though a chill spread through him that made him shiver.

At that moment, the boy's face crumpled into an expression of utter terror. He shook violently and his breath became ragged. Stunned, Zane drew back as Jay threw him a confused look.

"I only smiled at him," Zane said apologetically, just as confused, as Jay gathered the boy up in his arms.

"I'll take him to ya mum," Jay said, as the petrified boy buried his face into his chest and clung to him desperately.

Zane sagged, watching them go. Smudge peered up at him. "Whatcha do to him?"

"Nothing! I've never even seen him before!"

Smudge raised an eyebrow. "Looked like he'd seen you before."

Chapter 3

DEV'S TOKEN

Zane kept busy in the garden for the rest of that day, steering clear of the house whilst his mother tended to the new boy under Jay's protective supervision. At supper that evening he was quiet, not wanting to talk too much about anything, in case it led to the tale of the Giant in the hospital. Zane wasn't ready to face her anger about that yet.

For her part, Miri assumed he was brooding about the new boy's reaction that Jay had mentioned, and left him to it. The boy had clearly been distressed and disoriented, and she couldn't understand why Zane was so shaken up by his behaviour.

The next morning she was relieved to see that he was back to his old self. Not only was he cheery and pleased to see her, but he had risen early and stoked up the fire to boil the day's drinking water. He kissed her on the cheek, just like every morning, and she hugged him tightly.

"Everything alright?"

Zane rested his chin on her shoulder, it still being a novelty to be able to do so and thought for a moment. Somehow it still wasn't the right time to tell her about the Giant, but there was something else to talk about. "I had a weird dream last night."

"Tell me about it whilst I make breakfast."

Zane leant against the door frame, his back to the living room, as his mother began to chop the fruit he had picked the day before. The kitchen, like the whole downstairs of the house, was tidy and clean, worn and patched. Small, meticulously labelled pots and jars containing ointments, seeds, preserves, and dried fruit lined every work surface. The dark-red tiled floor,

swept daily, was marked with scrapes from the wooden stools tucked under the table in the corner. The wooden cupboards, full of mismatched crockery, also showed signs of age, but it was all well cared for. The oven was treated as the best mouse-proof cupboard, as all of the cooking was done on a trivet over the fire in the living room. The back door into the small courtyard at the rear was open to let in the pleasant morning breeze, a thin muslin curtain pinned over it to keep out the summer insects.

"I dreamt I was in a house, not this one," Zane began. "I was living there but it wasn't my home. Everything was very dusty, and all the picture frames I could see were turned face-down, so I couldn't see the people in them." Zane glanced back into the living room at the framed pictures on the mantel piece over the fire. All were old photos of his mother with her parents when she was younger. All Zane had heard about them was that they died when it happened; Miri didn't like to talk too much about the past.

Miri looked up at the pause and he continued. "I could see a rug that had been rolled back, and there was a weird sort of door in the floor and steps that went down."

"A cellar," Miri said, her knife halfway through an apple as she frowned a little. "You've never seen one before ..."

"Oh. Well, there was one of those there," Zane continued, unconcerned, "but I didn't go down it, I knew someone was down there, but not a bad person. Anyway, the really weird thing was that I looked in a mirror in the dream, and I had strange purple eyes."

"Purple eyes?! Like you'd get from a fight?"

"No no, the um ... the bit that's brown –"

"The iris."

"Yeah, that bit, they were like a pale purple, the same colour as those flowers that grow on the right-hand side on the way to Jay's square."

"Violet," Miri's hand was still poised on the knife halfway through the apple. "Like Elizabeth Taylor's eyes."

"Who?"

Miri shook her head, starting to chop quickly again and Zane knew she had thought about before it happened.

"Isn't that a weird thing to dream about?"

Miri nodded. "Do you remember if your face was the same?"

Zane shook his head. "I can only remember the eyes ... and that was all that happened, but it was so clear, it felt like I was really there."

He watched her chop the rest of the fruit and then mix it all together, remaining silent. Miri glanced over at him expectantly a few times but didn't press him to talk about the day before.

"The little boy was alright in the end," she commented as she served the fruit into Zane's favourite bowl.

"Oh, right ... that's good."

Miri frowned at him and sighed. "Are you sure you're alright?"

He nodded hurriedly and took the bowl she offered. "What do we need to do today?" Miri didn't press further.

As the days went by, Miri noted that Zane wasn't visiting the Boys, but she didn't worry too much about it—the same had happened in the past. Sometimes Zane would want to be close to others his age, sometimes he preferred her company; either way she was sure he would drift back there soon. Besides, summer was always very busy, and she was glad he wasn't being distracted from all that had to be done. And the less time she spent worrying about what he might be getting dragged into with the Bloomsbury Boys, the better.

The night of the next full moon brought Dev to the square again. Zane was much more alert this time when he opened

the window. "Is it the Giant again?"

Dev shook his head and Zane smiled with relief.

"Ain't seen you for ages, don't you wanna be friends with us no more?"

Zane looked away, feeling guilty for avoiding them, but then fired back, "You didn't come over here either."

"Couldn't. Jay's got us busy at the moment. We heard noises on the other side of the barricade few days back, and what with the Giant an' all ..."

"So why couldn't you wait until morning to visit?" Zane yawned.

"Because it needs to be dark to do what I'm gonna do, not too dark mind you. But tonight's perfect, and I need your help." Zane listened with apprehension. "I'm gonna get me a Token, best one ever. Ever." Dev puffed up his chest, the moonlight glinting off his highly polished metal badge.

Zane was far from keen. "It sounds dangerous."

"Course it is!"

"It's not something from the ..." Zane swallowed hard. "The Gardners is it?"

Dev shook his head. "Nah, too hard—anyway, loads of the others have got stuff from them. I wanna do something better, something *different*." At Zane's raised eyebrow, he continued. "I'm gonna get sommat from the Red Lady's place."

"What?!"

"I'm gonna get one of her banners. I went and had a look-see at 'er patch last night, and I reckon if someone kept watch for the guards, I could grab one and run with it."

"You're mad."

"No, really, it'd work, Zane, honest-like! I just need you to keep watch, not go close or anything."

Zane knew that the Red Lady's territory, with Gray's Inn at its heart, was only ten minutes from the garden to the south-east if one were stupid enough to attempt to walk there out in

the open. He'd never been there himself, but he'd heard from the Bloomsbury Boys that the territory was marked by daubs of red paint on the buildings around the perimeter. Some said it was blood, but he wasn't sure he believed them.

"They kill people who go near, Jay told me, and Mum too. They both said to stay away."

"Aw, c'mon. Don't be like that. They only kill people they catch."

"That doesn't make me feel any better."

Dev sighed with frustration. "I thought it all through and it'll be fine. They don't expect anyone to do this, that's why it'll work. C'mon, help me out. I gotta get another Token. Len got one the other day from the Gardners, and he's half the size of me. Everyone laughs at me all the time; I gotta show them that I'm worth sommat."

Zane listened to Dev's pleading and his face softened. "It doesn't matter what people say about you, Dev."

"It's alright for you, you ain't one of us. You got Miri and the garden. It's different 'ere." Dev hung his head. "If I don't show 'em I'm worth sommat, they'll kick me out. So I'm gonna do this. Tonight. And if you 'ent gonna help me, then I'll go on my own."

Dev turned and began to march off purposefully. Zane watched him, worried, and then called him back with a loud whisper. "I'll ... I'll watch for you. But I'm not going close."

It was the nearest that Zane had ever been to the Red Lady's territory, and he was shivering despite the warmth of the summer night. Dev had posted him on the corner of Northington Street where it met Gray's Inn Road, the best place to watch for the patrol that guarded her and the inner territory. From his position, he could see the large gates, shut fast, and the white-washed walls that shone silver blue in the moonlight. Interspersed at regular intervals were long banners of silk that

billowed gently in the summer breeze, stretching from the top of the wall down to the ground, some forty feet or so in length and about ten feet wide. Dev had described them to him on the way, in the moonlight they looked black, but he knew that they were blood-red.

The street that ran along her walls was completely clear of debris and wreckage, just like the areas around his own home and the Boys' territory too. But the street seemed even cleaner here, like it was swept regularly, and the walls were immaculate.

He held a piece of string that he fed through his hands from a ball that he cradled to his chest. Dev had tied the end around his wrist, and given Zane instructions on what to do. One sharp tug if Zane caught sight of a guard on top of the wall, two if the guard was looking in Dev's direction. Three sharp tugs for a guard at street level and that would bring Dev back and abort the mission. One slow pull on the string was agreed as an all-clear.

He watched Dev inch along the wall, crouched, staying in its shadow. His attention flicked between his friend creeping towards the closest banner and the top of the wall. When Dev was about halfway, Zane caught sight of one of the Red Lady's men appearing at the edge of it and gave one urgent tug on the string. Dev froze and crouched even lower as Zane watched the man's silhouette carefully. He could make out the drawn bow and the notched arrow, and the size of the man's muscles even in the dim light. However, the guard didn't look down at Dev's position and simply walked slowly along the wall, occasionally glancing into the street below, but nothing more. Finally, when he turned away at the end of the wall to patrol another edge of the perimeter, Zane finally let out his breath and gave a slow pull on the string to indicate the all clear. Dev began to creep along again.

Dev reached the first banner and turned to give Zane an eager grin and thumbs up. Dev seemed to detach the bottom of the fabric from something obscured by the darkness, then stood and gripped the dark material tightly. The silk rippled and creased as his fists grasped it, then after a brief nod back to Zane, he pulled down with all his strength in an effort to detach it swiftly and cleanly.

The sound of several tinkling bells rang out into the night and both Zane and Dev gasped in shock. The banner didn't detach, despite Dev's desperate attempts. Even hanging all his body weight off it, the jangling only got louder with each wrench.

Zane gave two sharp tugs on the string as he watched three heads appear above the banner that Dev grappled with. In an instant, arrows were trained on him and Zane tugged urgently on the string, the code forgotten in his blind panic. He heard the heavy bolt of the gate slide slowly open and saw more guards spill out onto the street only metres away from where Dev was standing.

Dev, panicking, began to sprint back to Zane's position as arrows rained down, hitting the ground where his ankles were but moments before. The string went slack, and Zane dropped the ball as he began to back away, not being able to tear his eyes away from the disaster befalling his friend. He could see the Hunters on the ground gaining on him easily, and then in one horrible moment, he heard an agonised cry erupt from Dev as one of the arrows fired from above hit its target and the Boy tumbled to the ground. One of the Hunters jumped on Dev, his drawn sword gleaming in the moonlight, and Zane froze as the man noticed the string trailing from Dev's arm. The Hunter's keen eyes followed it in moments, all the way back to where Zane stood, mouth agape, his face the colour of the moon.

Then he was running, not daring to look behind him as arrows began to hit the corner of the building he darted behind. He pounded down Northington Street, his heartbeat booming in his ears. The footsteps of his pursuers echoed off the walls of the street, this one filled with rusting car wrecks, drifts of dust and debris. Cold sweat beaded on his forehead as the arrows whipped past him. He threw himself around the corner at the end of the road into John Street, chest heaving.

He knew the Hunters were gaining on him, and that knowledge pushed him to run headlong down the street not thinking about where he was going, only about getting away. He was so fixed on the end of the road that he didn't notice that the door of one of the dark buildings was slightly ajar. Nor did he see the arm reach out from it as he shot past to grab him firmly by the wrist and pull him into the black entranceway.

It happened so fast that he fell as the door behind him was shut silently. A sour smell assaulted his senses; it seemed the person who had grabbed him didn't wash often. A malodorous hand clamped over Zane's mouth before he could yell out and a voice breathed into his ear with a scent of something sweet on it.

"Don't speak, don't move."

There was a lilt in the male voice, sounding like no-one that Zane had ever met before. Shaking violently from fear and exertion, he did as he was told as the Hunters ran past the doorway.

"My name's Callum," the voice whispered. "Do as I say and you'll live to see your mother again. You've upset some strong people there, my lad. Now we stay hidden and silent, until the storm has passed. Understand?"

Zane nodded, blinking into the inky darkness around him. The building was cold, the floor felt dirty and littered with rubbish, and its windows were too filthy for any moonlight to penetrate. He couldn't see what his rescuer looked like, but his

deep voice sounded kind.

“Can’t do anything for your friend now. Let’s get somewhere more safe, then you can sleep.”

The smelly hand left Zane’s mouth and moved to his shoulder, then patted down his arm to catch hold of his left hand. He was pulled to his feet and then guided slowly across the room, blind as a newborn mouse, deeper into the abandoned building.

Chapter 4

FAILURE

It was late in the evening of the next day by the time that Zane was returned to his mother. The sun had coloured the sky a deep red that reflected off the taller buildings of the square, the same colour as Miri's puffy, bloodshot eyes.

She was waiting outside the house, twisting a handkerchief in her hands. After the initial panicked search of the house and garden that morning, she had gone to Jay's square, only to find him searching for Dev. They both suspected the worst. Jay had sent Boys out searching the edges of the territory, even in the hospitals, despite Miri's insistence that they couldn't be there. In the end Jay had told her to wait, that they would come back, as it was too risky to push out into no man's land or the enemy territories.

The waiting was the worst. She had tried to keep busy, tried to focus on the garden, but found herself grinding to a halt, seized by terrible thoughts and imagined scenarios where his body had been found. All afternoon, the slightest sound had brought her running to the edge of the garden, until she had given up altogether and just stood there, waiting, simply incapable of doing anything else. She had spent fifteen years worrying about Zane's safety, but this was the first time she'd thought he could be dead.

When she saw him emerge from the far side of the square she ran to him and crushed him to her, as if trying to absorb him back into her own body. She didn't even see Callum who stood back respectfully, and neither did Zane notice Jay and Grame lurking near his house. For a good minute or so Miri clutched him tightly, and then held him at arm's length, tears streaming down her cheeks as she checked him for injury.

"I'm not hurt, Mum," he mumbled, trying hard not to cry. Zane had also wept that day, both for his dead friend and for his mother, who he knew would be distraught.

"Where were you what were you doing why did you go without telling me?" The questions gushed out of Miri's mouth as fast as the tears sprang from her eyes. Zane just stood there, unsure of what to say. A tiny gasp escaped from his mother as she saw his new friend.

"Mum, this is Callum. He looked after me."

Miri looked uncertainly at the man who stood a few metres back. Callum was fairly tall, but it was hard to tell the size of his frame as he wore so many layers of filthy clothing that all stank of sweat and dirt. His face was mostly obscured by a huge, matted beard that reached down to the middle of his chest. At the edges it tangled with his long, wild hair that had clumped together into long knots, in places looking less like hair than dirty grey rope. His kind eyes, sparkling like wet polished slate, were incongruous with the sheer mess of him. The beard twitched slightly, and from the crinkling around his eyes Miri deduced that he was smiling at her.

Pale and shaken, she simply nodded at him and said "Thank you" in a wavering voice, pulling Zane towards the house where she could lock the door and keep her son close.

Callum gave a brief nod back, acknowledged Jay with a quick raise of his bushy eyebrows, and then shuffled out of the square. Jay touched his own forehead briefly with his right hand in a curt salute to the old man and then focused on Zane as he was steered towards the house.

"Was Dev with you?" he asked, and frowned as he saw the tears well in Zane's eyes. "He coming back?"

Zane simply shook his head, allowing Miri to guide him into the house. Jay's right fist clenched into a tight ball and he began to follow them in, but Miri stopped him. "Tomorrow, Jay, we'll talk tomorrow."

Jay's jaw tightened as he fought back the urge to just push past Miri. But he respected territory and after a moment nodded in capitulation.

"Zane, I want answers first thing tomorrow," he said and turned on his heels, beckoning Grame to follow.

Miri shut and locked the door, steered Zane to the sofa, and went into the kitchen wordlessly. In moments she returned with a bowl and served some of the soup from the pot hanging over the fire into it. As Zane began to eat, she went into her room and re-emerged with a blanket from her own bed to wrap around him.

She sat in the armchair opposite and watched him devour the soup, not saying anything as she filled it again for him and watched him eat that too. He scraped the spoon around the bowl, scooping every last chunk of carrot and potato into his mouth. Only when he was finished did Miri say, "Tell me what happened."

And Zane did, his voice croaking and faltering as he related what happened to Dev. He could barely bring himself to look at his mother's face, her lips and cheeks whiter than he had ever seen them. He broke down as he told her how he had abandoned Dev's body and ran, thinking only of himself and his own survival.

Miri went to his side and wrapped her arms around him, rocking him gently as if he were a small child again, and let him sob into her hair. As his distress subsided, she moved away from him to look into his eyes.

"Zane, there was nothing you could have done. You were right to run. Dev made his choice and knew the risk—there was no point losing you too." He wiped his eyes and nodded weakly. "Where does this Callum come into it?"

"He pulled me off the street when the Hunters were chasing me. He knew the building really well, actually quite a few buildings. He knew how they were laid out by heart and could

move around them in the dark and everything. And he knew how to move between buildings in a clever way, through really narrow places, like it was between gaps in the walls. It meant that we could hide off the street until they stopped looking. He smells terrible but he's actually really nice. He just doesn't have you to look after him."

Miri seemed distant for a moment and then asked urgently, "They don't know it was you, do they, Zane?"

Zane shrugged nervously. "I don't know ... it was dark."

Miri chewed her lip, frowning down at the rug in the centre of the room. "No ... if they suspected you they would have come here today. They must just assume that you were one of the Bloomsbury Boys. I need to go and speak to Jay about this right now as there may be retaliation." She stood and grabbed her shawl from the armchair. "Light the candles. It'll be dark by the time I come back. Lock the door after me, and do not leave the house, do you hear?"

Zane nodded, not used to such a stern tone of voice from his mother. Just as she was about to turn the handle of the front door he called to her. "Mum?"

She turned to look at him, her mind clearly focused on her task, "Yes?"

"Are you angry with me?"

She sighed. "I was, but now I'm just glad that you're home and safe. Promise me you won't do anything that stupid ever again."

"I promise."

Zane didn't leave the house for a couple of days and either Grame or Mark was always present at the edge of the garden square, watching over Miri, as all feared some kind of retribution. But no Hunters from the Red Lady were sighted, and so the tension gradually subsided into a quiet grief. Jay checked on Miri personally at the end of each day, only

stopping by for a quick conversation as he was reluctant to leave the Boys for too long on their own. They'd only end up fighting, mucking about or trashing something, and he needed to make sure their energy was focused on survival, not seeing who could pee the highest up a wall.

On the third day Zane finally went outside and helped his mother in the garden. He was still withdrawn, but Miri was relieved that he was at least starting to get on with things again. They worked close to each other, comfortable with the silence between them filled by the birdsong, the sound of digging, and the pulling up of weeds as they harvested the latest crops and herbs.

When the sun hit the corner of the garden, they paused for mid-morning tea as usual, made from a blend of herbs created by Miri that was both refreshing and restorative. Later that day, as they were about to lay down tools, they heard a sound that froze Zane and spurred Miri into action. It was the alarm from the Boys' square that was only sounded in the worst kind of emergency: a Gardner attack.

Miri scooped up her tools into her skirt and grabbed Zane's hand to pull him into the house. She then bolted the door and instructed Zane to check that all of the windows and the back door were also locked as she drew the curtains of the living room.

It had happened many times before, but this time Miri was more on edge. The loud clanging of the metal bar on the rusting car roof in the Boys' square was muffled indoors but still audible, carried easily across an almost silent London. Then it stopped, and both Miri and Zane knew that now, as they hid, the Boys would be engaged in a brutal fight for survival.

After a few moments, Miri went to pack her satchel with fresh bandages, needle and thread and then gathered her pestle and mortar with a selection of fresh herbs to make the poultice that would inevitably be used on some kind of

wound. Whilst she did this, Zane tied his hair back and washed his hands in the bucket of water drawn from the pump that morning.

Then there was nothing to do except wait, poised, listening intently for the sound of the all clear. Some minutes later it was sounded, and Miri cautiously peeped out from behind the curtains.

They both knew not to leave the house until one of the Boys called round, just in case a rogue Gardner strayed into their square. It had happened only once since Zane had been alive, but that one time was enough to establish the rule firmly.

Sure enough, a short time after the all clear, a knock of three rapid raps, then three slower ones hit the front door and Miri rushed to open it, recognising Jay's code.

But it was Grame who stood panting at the doorway, a gash above his left eye sending a steady flow of blood down his white face.

"Quick, come to our patch," he gasped and turned and ran. Miri and Zane hastily followed.

Both Miri and Zane expected to see wounded Boys, both had even steeled themselves for the sight of ones that had died, but neither of them had prepared for what met them on arrival in Russell Square.

Most of the gang was clustered tightly around the corner nearest to the barricade. As they both ran over, they heard the sound of sniffing and whimpering of injured Boys, some calling Jay's name, some of the older ones calling for Miri. She went straight to the nearest, Smudge, on the edge of the crowd, who was clutching his arm, blood seeping out between his fingers that were clasped over the wound.

Zane instead pushed through the crowd, intent on seeing what was drawing all of the attention. The Boys parted when

they saw it was him, and then he saw Jay up ahead, still tense with both knives drawn, looking down at a body on the ground in front of him.

Zane paused mid-step as he approached and blinked in surprise; his eyes were drawn down to the body on the ground, and he pushed past a couple of the bigger Boys to get a better look.

The Gardner's face was an awful ashen grey, and his breath was rapid and shallow. He wore the familiar black suit and black tie, but the crisp whiteness of his shirt was spoilt by a deep red bloom spreading out from a point high on the right side of his chest.

Zane gawped at the sight of him, then dropped onto his knees to swiftly loosen the man's tie and unbutton his shirt.

"What are you doing?" Jay demanded in a low growl, but Zane ignored him.

"Finish him off, Jay!" shouted one of the Boys and then others agreed with eager shouts: "Kill him! Get him Jay!" The many voices began to settle into a chilling chant as Zane trembled on his knees, his hands poised above the Gardner's chest. "Kill! Kill! Kill! Kill!"

Zane, not knowing why—only that he should—placed both of his hands on the Gardner's skin. The moment he made contact he drew in a sharp breath and what little colour was left in his cheeks drained away rapidly. His eyes darted all over the man's chest, sometimes focusing on the large stab wound, but mostly lingering in the region of his heart.

"Zane!" Jay yelled above the bloodlust chanting. "What the hell are you doing?"

"I can see it!" Zane said back, barely audible above the yells of the crowd around him.

The man's eyes fluttered open, rolling around briefly before settling on Zane. "Help me," he croaked, the breath gurgling and rattling in his failing lungs.

Zane gritted his teeth and took a deep breath, letting his eyes fall upon the wound. Many of the Boys watched as the blood seeping out of it started to slow.

“He’s going!” one of them yelled joyfully, thinking that the failing heart was no longer forcing the blood from the wound.

“It’s not enough!” Zane muttered, unheard above the jeering.

None of the Boys noticed the sweat break out onto Zane’s forehead; they only saw the Gardner’s dying breaths. With delight, they rejoiced in the moment when the tension in his agonised body drained away to leave him lying there, staring up at Zane with glassy eyes. Zane cried out in despair and pulled back, as if the body had suddenly become very cold and was freezing him.

An ecstatic roar leapt up from the Boys and Jay held the knives, still coated with his opponent’s blood, high above his head for all to see. Several of the Boys nearest to the body began to kick it, and Zane crawled away to let them close in around it, desperate for air. He managed to emerge from the crowd and stagger to his feet only to double over and vomit into one of the drains nearby.

JAY'S CHALLENGE

Once again Zane found himself on the sofa, a blanket wrapped around him, and a mug of his mother's tea in his hand. Miri watched him stare into space, her forehead furrowed with deep lines of concern.

"Drink the tea, Zane, you've had a shock."

He sipped at it obediently and looked up at her. "Mum, I think something weird is happening to me."

"It's just shock, it'll pass."

"No, I don't mean that, I mean ... the Gardner earlier today, something weird happened and I don't know what to make of it."

Miri perched on the sofa next to him and rubbed his back slowly, reassuringly. "Why don't you describe how it felt to me and we'll see if we can work it out together," she said gently.

Zane searched for the right place to start. Miri watched his hands shaking the mug, threatening to send the hot liquid spilling over the edge. She wrapped the blanket tighter around him as the shivering started again. "Sip the tea," she whispered and he did so.

"Today, the Gardner ... I know they're horrible. I know they hurt and kill the Boys, but I couldn't stop myself from trying to help him. Even before I saw him, I sort of knew he was down on the ground and in pain." Miri listened intently, stroking his hair like she did when he was small and had woken from a night terror. "I ... could *really* see him, like normal but clearer, but then I had the urge to touch his skin, so I did and then it was like I could really see him. It was like he had a kind of blue glow around him that was fading, and I could see the blood rushing

out of that stab wound, and how his lungs were filling with blood and how his heart was starting to give up.” The words rushed out of him in a torrent, his eyes fixed on the floor in front of him as if he were seeing it all happen in front of him again. “Even though I knew he was a bad person, I couldn’t stand that he was in pain, and I wanted the wound to close and ... and ... it started to. In front of my eyes, and I knew I was doing it. I knew it. But it was too late, and he died, and when he did, it was like putting my hands in snow, and I felt cold. It was just horrible.”

Miri was silent for a few moments. She cleared her throat quietly and then said “It’s hard to see a person die for the first time. It’s natural for you to feel odd at the moment.”

“No, Mum, I feel normal now, just a bit wobbly. What I’m saying is that I felt odd *then*.” He sipped more tea. “Do you see inside the Boys when you bandage up their cuts?”

Stunned by such an odd question, at first Miri simply shook her head. “No ... never,” she eventually said. Zane was disappointed, lost, and in the moments of silence that followed, she composed herself. “Zane, you’re a bright, imaginative boy. I think that you’re really talented at helping and healing people, and when you’re there with someone that is hurt, you really feel what they do. You empathise with them.”

“What does empathise mean?”

“It means that you put yourself in their place and know how they feel so much that you begin to feel it a little bit yourself too. I think that you’re so good at that, that you begin to think you’re seeing into them. You know enough about the human body to be able to imagine these things very clearly. I don’t think you’re odd.” Miri paused as she thought about this and then said more firmly, “No, you’re not odd at all, just very involved. That’s all.”

Zane let the confidence in his mother’s voice

soothe him.

“Finish your tea,” she said, “and I’ll make us some lunch.”

And with that, Miri went into the kitchen. As she peeled vegetables, the deepest part of her mind took what Zane had confided in her, threw a dark cloak over it, and like a magician worked to change it into something safer, more normal, and less frightening. By the time soup was ready his story had already begun to fit much more comfortably into the slot reserved for products of her son’s overactive imagination. With its newly acquired shape, she found it easier to ignore; after all, she was constantly working on the hard business of survival. They needed to eat, plants needed to be picked and pruned, and just as she had through all of the trials life had brought, she clung to that distraction like heather clings to an Atlantic cliff.

By the next day, things were almost back to normal. Zane tried hard to convince himself that the extraordinary moments with the Gardner had been nothing more than being “very involved” by busying himself in the garden and changing the dressings on the injuries sustained by some of the Boys. One by one they drifted to Miri’s door, sent by Jay to be cared for, relating the tale of how they got the cut or gash and what Jay had said about it. Mercifully it had been a small attack of three Gardners and only two of them lived to return home. Zane shuddered when each Boy gleefully described how Jay had stripped the dead Gardner down to his underwear and dragged his body to the top of the barricade single-handedly to throw it over to the other side.

After the Boys had left, Zane sat alone in his room, gripped by the nausea caused by their delight in the violence of the day before. Not even the familiar comfort of being in his small room filled with books, conkers, and dried curiosities found in the garden was enough to comfort him.

Not for the first time, he wondered if there was something wrong with him. He was a boy, like those in Jay's gang, so why didn't he enjoy the fighting like them? As hard as he tried, he just couldn't understand how they could hate being hurt themselves, yet delight in another person's pain. Perhaps he was too much like his mother. When that occurred to him, he realised he didn't think that was a bad thing. Perhaps it was the other way round; perhaps the Bloomsbury Boys were strange because they didn't have a Mum to make them kind. That helped him to pull himself back together, and he went into the garden to find Miri. He hugged her fiercely whilst her hands were still deep in the soil, saying, "I'm so glad I have you, Mum."

That evening, as Zane was tidying away the day's work whilst Miri made dinner, he noticed a familiar figure at the corner of the square. He dropped the tools and ran over, excitedly calling, "Callum!"

The beard twitched and a dirty hand emerged from the bundle of clothing to shake Zane's warmly.

"How are you, my lad?"

"Ok. You?"

"As fine as can be. I was wondering how your mother is now. All calmed down again?"

Zane nodded and smiled. "Why don't you come and say hello? There might be soup too."

Callum's bright eyes looked down at the ground shyly. "That's kind of you, lad, but I'm no company for a lady."

"Oh. Alright."

Callum cleared his throat and said, "I found this. I thought she might like it." A small bundle of fabric was produced from amongst the mass of layers and Zane took it from him gently. "Only a tiny thing, but, well, I thought ..." Callum shrugged and shuffled a little.

Zane smiled. "I'll pass it on to her."

“And I hope you’ve not been wandering off again?”

Zane shook his head solemnly. “I know not to do that.”

“Well, at least one lesson learned is some good to come out of it. Something’s brewing over in the Bloomsbury patch, so you tread carefully there. Jay’s worked up about something.”

“Do you know Jay and the Boys?”

The beard and matted hair moved up and down. “Ay, I know them. You be careful around them, Zane. Ask yourself why there are no grown-up Bloomsbury Boys.”

And with that, the old man shuffled off, this time heading east towards the area where he had saved Zane from the Hunters. Zane watched him go and then ran into the house.

“Mum! You’ve got a present! From Callum!”

Miri emerged from the kitchen. “The man who looked after you?”

She took the package from Zane as he nodded and watched eagerly. She carefully unravelled the scrap of material to reveal a dainty shawl pin in perfect condition. It was made of bright silver that had clearly been polished carefully. A delicate Scottish thistle decorated the top of it, and Miri smiled broadly when she saw it. “How lovely!” she exclaimed. “Is he Scottish?”

“Huh?” Zane asked, bemused.

“Never mind,” she said and pinned it to her favourite shawl that lay on the armchair.

“I’m going over to Jay’s for a little while, ok?”

Still smiling at the gift, Miri nodded, saying, “Be back before dark” as Zane slipped out of the door.

Callum had been right. When Zane arrived, most of the Bloomsbury Boys were clustered tightly around Jay in the middle of the square. Grame was posted on the edge of the territory, and even though Zane smiled warmly at him, Grame’s greeting was colder than usual.

"I reckon Jay wants to see ya," he said, hands deep in his pockets, shoulders hunched.

"Okay," Zane replied, remaining sunny despite the reception. Perhaps he could help fix whatever was making him so bad tempered.

The murmur of the gathered Boys dissipated as he approached, and the ones nearest to him moved apart to open a way to Jay in the middle. Zane noticed the absence of nods and smiles and regretted coming to visit.

"Hello," he said, smiling despite his nervousness.

"Zane," Jay said, straightening to his full height. "Funny you should come over now. We were just talkin' 'bout you."

The Boys closed in behind Zane, forming a tight circle around him and the young gang leader. Zane's mouth went dry. "Me?" he replied, trying his best to stop his voice cracking under the tension. He failed.

"Yup. See, we was wonderin' sommat, and now you're 'ere, maybe you could give us some answers."

"Um, okay."

"Yesterday, you did sommat weird. That Gardner, when he was dyin', you touched him. On the chest."

Zane nodded hesitantly. "Yes, I did." There was no point denying it; they had all seen it happen.

"The thing with Gardners," Jay said louder, with more showmanship, "is that the only way to touch them is with the sharp end of yer knife, right, Boys?"

"Right!" several of them cheered.

"And, the thing about that," Jay continued, "is it ain't to do nothin' but kill 'em. We don't stick 'em with our knives to be nice, do we, Boys?"

"No!" more joined in, some snickering.

"You ain't got a knife, Zane," Jay rounded on him. "And you didn't look like you were tryin' to kill 'im." He let the statement hang in the air. "So what I wanna know is, if ya didn't

wanna kill 'im, what the hell were you doin'?"

Zane's stomach cramped with tension. He curled his hands into fists and thrust them into his pockets so Jay wouldn't see them shaking. "I ... I don't know. He was hurt –"

"I know!" Jay interrupted. "I was the one that done it!"

There was a mixture of cheers and laughter from the assembled, but Jay didn't look amused. Zane swallowed, peeling his tongue from the roof of his mouth.

"Mark 'ere," Jay jerked a thumb at one of the tallest Boys, "says you threw up when the Gardner died."

Zane nodded slowly. "Y-yes ... I was sick."

Jay scowled. "Why?"

"Um ... because of the ... the blood," Zane replied, unable to think of anything else to say that wasn't the truth, and he didn't feel that here, right now, was the time to tell them about his strange experience.

"Bollocks!" Jay exclaimed. "You an' Miri stitch us up all the time—you see blood nearly every day!" He took a step closer. "I'd 'ate to think you were lyin' to me, Zane. I can't stand a liar."

Zane struggled to draw a breath; it felt like his chest had seized up. Jay stared at him and the circle of Boys closed in a step. Zane could feel a tremor in his knees.

"See, Zane, I got a problem 'ere," Jay continued when the boy said nothing. "Cos I like ya, and I think ya mum's ace. And that's good for you, cos if that weren't true, you'd be pasted on the side of that buildin' over there." Mark picked that moment to crack his knuckles. "But the thing is, you looked like you were goin' soft on that Gardner. And that worries me, Zane, it worries me."

"I ... I don't want you to worry, Jay," Zane replied, his voice wavering.

"That's good, Zane, that's good," Jay said, planting a

hand on his shoulder and gripping it firmly. "None of us want that. But I know what I saw, and so I want proof you're not gonna start goin' soft on them Gardners when they start on us again."

Zane's throat felt like it was closing. "Proof?"

"Go get one of their ties for Jay!" said Grame, sparking a round of jeering agreement from the circle.

"Don't be daft," Jay dismissed. "He's too soft to stab a live one." As the Boys laughed, Jay pointed at the barricade. "But he could practise on the one they left behind."

Zane's throat burned as bile rose up from his twisting stomach. He'd never been near a dead body before; his mother had made sure of that. But he had read about it in the medical books at home. He thought of the Gardner Jay had tossed over the other side the day before, how the body would be cold and stiff by now.

Zane swallowed hard as Jay continued, a chilling smile spreading across his face like a dark cloud on a spring day. "I'll letchya borra me knife, can't say fairer than that." Jay drew one of the pair, tilted the blade to capture the last of the evening sunlight. "Go over and stab the body, Zane."

"Yeah! Stab it!" Boys yelled around him, building themselves up into a chant. "Stab it! Stab it!"

Jay leaned in close to him, holding up a hand to quiet the gang. "You bring the blade back clean, I'll know you're soft on 'em. We'll all know."

The Boys looked from Jay to Zane again, the tension twisting its thick strands tightly between them all. Zane looked at Jay's belt, thinking of all the men who must have been hurt or killed for Jay to have that many ties. He thought of his mother and what he'd promised her. He saw her face when Callum brought him back, how worried she'd been. What if there were Gardners on the other side of the barrier, hiding, waiting for a Boy to climb down and get rid of the body?

“He can’t hurt ya!” Mark yelled, frustrated by Zane’s hesitation. “He’s dead already!”

The Boys laughed and the shoving resumed. Jay turned the knife to present the handle to Zane.

“Do it, Zane!” Grame yelled and the Boys echoed him. “Do it! Do it!”

Jay’s face twisted into a cruel sneer. “Why don’t you just say that you’re too scared?”

Zane took a deep breath, mindful of the Boys closing in around him. Jay needed his mum too much to hurt him, but he also knew that if he didn’t do this, they would make his life miserable. Swallowing down another surge of nausea, he reached for the blade.

“JAY!” The bellow came from the north end of the square. Jay’s head snapped around to see Callum cradling a limp body in his arms with a familiar shock of ginger hair. “Jay! Come here! I’ve found Dev and he’s alive!”

In moments the knife was sheathed and the challenge forgotten as all raced over to Callum. Jay snatched Dev from his offering arms and shook him gently.

“Dev? Dev!” he called but Dev didn’t stir.

“Cor, what’s that on his face?” one of the Boys exclaimed as Zane struggled to push his way past them all to see how his friend was.

The Boys made it hard for him; elbows jabbed into his sides, and they were slow to move aside as he pushed at them. He finally broke through to see two gashes, one on each of Dev’s cheeks, describing a line from near the corners of his mouth to the outer edges of his cheekbones. The cuts didn’t seem too deep, but what was alarming was their intense red colour, too garish to be just blood. It not only sat within the line of the cuts but had also seeped out into the skin of his cheeks, tiny cracks of dark red like fractures on the porcelain glaze of his pale face.

"She marked him!" Jay snarled with such rage that many of the Boys closest to him backed away without even realising what they were doing.

"Let's take him to Mum," Zane suggested and Jay nodded, immediately breaking into a run.

"You lot stay 'ere," he called back to the gang. "And keep watch for that bitch's Hunters."

Callum drifted after Zane and Jay as they hurried over to Miri's square, keeping his distance but eager to see what was happening.

Zane wasn't surprised to see his mother opening the door as they arrived; the sound of their footsteps had reverberated off the surrounding buildings like heralds' trumpets.

"He won't wake up, Miri!" Jay exclaimed, and she beckoned them into the house.

They gently laid Dev down on the sofa, the front door left open in their haste. Callum stood just outside of the door frame, looking in but also trying hard not to be noticed.

Miri carefully checked Dev's airways and breathing, monitored his pulse, and loosened the layers of clothing as best she could.

"He's dead pale," Jay said, hovering nearby like a nervous father.

Miri simply nodded, glancing at Zane and noting how intensely he was staring at Dev. "Check his leg, Mum, it's hurt," he muttered whilst pointing to his left calf.

She pulled up the trouser leg and revealed a clean, tightly wrapped bandage. "Perhaps this is where that arrow hit," she said. "They've bandaged it well."

Zane nodded, staring at it intently. "The wound's clean," he said quietly as Miri shuddered at his odd behaviour.

Jay looked at Zane, confused. "How'd you know? You can't even see it."

Dev moaned quietly, and Miri caught hold of his hand

gently, distracting Jay. She stroked the back of it, very softly calling Dev's name.

Dev's eyelids struggled open and he looked up at the trio with bloodshot eyes. "Watchya," he murmured in a shaky voice.

"Thought you were dead, Dev," Jay said affectionately.

"Nah," Dev croaked back, "but I think I might've been for a bit." He began to reach up to his face but Miri caught hold of his hand and gently pushed it down again.

"Your cheeks are cut. Don't touch them or they'll get infected."

"That why they're itching?"

She nodded, smoothing back hair from his forehead tenderly. "They'll get better soon."

"Whaddya remember?" Jay asked, kneeling down next to Miri.

"I nearly got it Jay, honest-like!" he murmured sleepily.

"Never mind that now," Jay replied, fighting a smile that tugged at the corner of his mouth. "You've been gone a few days—what happened?"

Dev seemed genuinely surprised. "I have? Only remember the banner ... and me leg killing me."

"Nothing about the Red Lady?"

Dev jolted like a tiny bolt of lightning had hit him, and his eyes opened wide. He began to speak, but his voice was devoid of any of its normal inflection. "If one of the Bloomsbury Boys enters my territory again, they will be killed on sight. Let the marks on this one remind you of that every day."

All three of them drew back, staring at Dev warily. But then he relaxed and looked around at them after blinking a couple of times. "What?" he asked confused, with his normal voice.

Jay and Miri exchanged a look. Callum tugged at the bottom of his beard and shuffled a little. Zane mustered a smile and said "Nothing, Dev. It's alright. We're just so glad to see you again."

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