

**SEVEN
SECOND
DELAY**

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Holiday House / New York

For Ella

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Summary: In a future where few places are still habitable and people share their entire lives on the Web, Mila illegally enters the Isles, is captured and has a telephone implanted in her brain, and escapes but government agents are after her and her greatest asset is a seven second delay from the time she acts until they receive the signal.

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Prologue

Julian tumbles. Slowly, it seems. Twisting down, down through the thin, gray air. Mila clings tightly to the safety wire and watches him get smaller. His body turns lazily, and as it faces upward she glimpses the pale face, the dark O of his mouth as he screams. Then he turns again, hiding his face from her. He is tiny now, shrinking, shrinking. All she can make out is the dark blue of the Agency uniform she stole for him in Sangatte.

He hits the main span of the bridge and ricochets off, spinning furiously. He must be dead, she thinks. That must have killed him. Please let it have killed him. But it is another few seconds before his body hits the water and she can be sure. He has fallen a quarter of a kilometer into the freezing waters of the English Channel.

At the speed he is traveling, water is like concrete. This she knows. It is one of the many things she has learned in her short life. Her stomach, already cramped with fear, knots and gnarls as she tries to comprehend what has just happened. She has lost him. Simultaneously, another part of her mind, uncomfortably lacking in compassion, is asking a plaintive question. What now, Mila? What are you going to do now that Julian is dead?

How will you survive?

A clock ticked slowly, legato seconds checked off one by one.

The woman. Attractive, older, blonde. In her mid-thirties, Mila guessed. She'd learned to adjust her estimates in the brief time she'd been on the Isles. Everyone here looked younger than they were. Or maybe everyone back home looked older. The mean had shifted.

The woman sighed. She hadn't given her name. Mila would have remembered, like she remembered everything. She waited for the woman to follow the sigh with a question, but it was the dark-haired man who spoke, wrong-footing her.

"Let's try again," he said calmly, a fake smile forced into his voice, slightly out of sync with the equally fake smile plastered across his face. It was a good face, Mila thought. Handsome. He was properly young, mid-twenties probably. He was the good cop, which was a role that seemed to suit him. Mila was skilled at reading people, though the occasional misjudgement had taught her not to trust herself entirely.

"What's your name?" The good cop looked at her earnestly, a little sideways grin appearing. *Come on*, his expression said. *Why fight this?* "What harm could it do to tell us your name?"

Because giving you my name gives you a measure of power

over me, Mila wanted to say. If I give you what you want, you'll use it against me. Otherwise why would you ask?

So she said nothing and kept her head down, staring at a spot at the center of the plastic table, her chosen focus point. It was the only thing she controlled, that square inch of off-white thermo-plastic; the only thing she owned in the world, and they couldn't take it away from her.

She knew enough about the Agency to know that you couldn't improve your position by cooperating. You couldn't negotiate. If they wanted something from you, they'd let you know about it. Julian had taught her that; it was just one of the million things she'd learned from him. Thinking about him brought pain, and she shut the memory down before it could take hold.

"We're not evil, you know," Good Cop said. "You think we are, but we're not. It's common for foreigners to believe the worst about us. We've heard all the stories before."

Mila had heard the stories too. About the Centers, the Hulks, the rough justice. She was curious to see for herself just what was fact and what was hysterical fiction. It couldn't be as bad as what she'd gone through in the U, could it?

"You have food and clothes, don't you?" he asked. "And a bed. The Center is warm and safe, is it not?"

What he said was true. Mila had been held in a dozen camps, or prisons, or "Centers" over the last three years. Some were better than others. Some had nearly killed her. The Center she was in now was by far the most comfortable. So why was she so full of dread here? she wondered. Was it because Julian was gone? Or was there more to it? There was something about these people that scared her. They were different.

"We've given you books to read," he went on. "You have a screen to watch the Channels."

Mila looked back at her spot. She blinked. Sluggish seconds ticked by on the clock.

Then a *crack!* as the woman slammed her palm down on the table, directly over Mila's focus point, as though Mila's gaze had

burned a spot there, revealing its location. Mila flinched, her heart pounding.

“What’s your goddamn NAME?” the woman yelled.

And a sudden torrent of fury loosened Mila’s tongue.

“What’s YOURS?” she roared back.

The man and woman sat back as one, smiling. They’d made progress.

“So at least we know you speak English,” the man said, pausing for a moment, probably making an internal note on his device. Neither of the Agents carried anything for the purpose. No one did in this country. They kept it all inside.

“It’s important to know names, isn’t it?” the good cop said, with another smile from his smile bank. A warm, conciliatory one this time. “My name’s Adam, I . . .” He stopped, looking alarmed. Mila caught a brief roll of the eyes from the older woman. She guessed that the man hadn’t intended to reveal his real name.

Adam went on. “This is . . .” He hesitated again.

“Eve?” Mila asked, unable to resist.

The older woman’s eyes flicked heavenward in annoyance at her colleague. He was clearly junior, inexperienced. He should have had a false name already prepared for himself and his colleague. Now Mila had been granted a small victory.

“Rebecca,” he said, resignedly, and Mila thought she saw a slight flush of his cheeks. He looked down at the table, perhaps seeking his own spot.

“Where were you born?” he asked, quietly.

Mila laughed, a sharp bark which said quite clearly that this was a question she would never answer.

He waited a moment, then tried a different tack.

“Okay, then tell me this,” he said. “How did you get onto the Isles?”

Mila stared at her spot and tried to zone out. He spoke like no one else she’d ever met. Perfect English, of course, but more than that. His voice had a confidence, a strength that she’d not come across before in her travels. He didn’t borrow language, to use it

apologetically. He owned it, and handed it over like a gift, wrapped in intent.

“Did you come over the bridge?”

The bridge. The word was enough to send her tumbling back in time to the day she’d lost Julian. A word, a scent. Even a simple gesture. It didn’t take much for her to be back on the weathered island of memory.

She stands, half crouching, on the wire-strand cable. It is thick enough to walk on, perhaps a meter in diameter. Nonetheless, she is unable to stand fully, half rigid with fear. The span of the bridge, the section carrying the cars and the trains, is one hundred meters below her, and the freezing gray water of the Channel is 150 meters below that.

“Come on,” he says. He is a few steps ahead of her, standing sideways, holding out a hand. His scarred, creased face is smiling encouragement. His curly black hair, shot through with salty white streaks, ruffles in the stiff breeze. They’d waited nine days for a time when the wind wasn’t too strong.

He smiles and steps toward her, and then suddenly there is a wind. A gust. An eddy. And he sways slightly. His left foot lands too far to the side, where the surface begins to slope. Then he is down, quickly. Too quickly. He clutches at a thin electrical wire running along the walkway. This holds him for a moment. But Mila can see it is already stretching. It is not designed to hold the weight of a man, even a gaunt, malnourished man. Cleats pop and the cable begins to pull away from the span.

“Get a phone,” Julian says firmly, as though prepared for this moment. “Once you have a phone, call Beverley Minster. But only if you’re in real trouble.”

“Julian, I . . .” she says, inching toward him. She is too far away.

“There’s something in . . .” he begins, but with a sickening jolt the cable comes fully away and for a tiny instant their eyes meet, his filled with nothing but sorrow, as he disappears over the side, silently.

* * *

"It was the bridge, wasn't it?" Adam repeated. "I can see by the way you reacted."

Mila shook her head. "No, not the bridge," she said.

"Then how?"

Mila leaned forward and fixed him with a conspiratorial look.

"Okay, I'll tell you," she said.

Adam leaned forward too, unable to help himself.

"Giant swans," Mila whispered. "I was carried by giant purple swans."

Adam pulled a wry smile from the smile bank. "That's funny," he said. "You have a sense of humor."

Mila sat back and arranged her features into what she hoped was a look of utter blankness.

"Adam, let's step outside for a moment," Rebecca said. "Please excuse us," she said, coldly. "My colleague and I would like a private chat."

"If you want to chat privately," Mila replied quietly, "you could just talk to each other using those machines in your heads." She looked up at the woman, trying to pierce her with her gaze. "You're just leaving to let me stew for a while. I'm familiar with the process."

She knew she was talking too much. She'd broken her resolve to say nothing. She was bored, which was part of their tactic. They'd been doing this for hours, days in fact, asking a few questions before leaving the room. Leaving her alone to listen to the incessant ticking of that damn clock, driving little nails of wasted time into her skull.

"We'll be back in a few minutes," Adam said. "Then we'll have some more questions for you."

"Missing you already."

The heavy door slammed shut, rattling the walls with its solidity, and Mila was left alone with her spot on the table. And the clock, of course.

"Everything's recorded," Julian tells her, one cold night, as they huddle over a fire in a paint tin in an abandoned farmhouse somewhere

in the country that used to be known as Germany. He is eating the leg of a lamb they stole and killed. Messily, cruelly. The meat is half burnt, half raw and tangy with the taste of the paint chemicals. Nonetheless it is a feast; it's all they've eaten this week apart from a few tins of beans and some tart cooking apples, six weeks from ripening.

Julian wipes his mouth, which is smeared with fat, shiny in the firelight. He looks, for a moment, like a caveman ten thousand years ago. "Everything," he repeats.

"There are cameras?" she asks. "Like in Prague?"

Julian shakes his head, shuddering at the memory. "No, they record everything in their heads. They have phones in their heads."

She looks at him skeptically.

It sometimes seems that Julian knows everything, can do anything. He is much older than her. He knows the U well, has spent time on the Isles themselves. He has also traveled the other way, through China and into the gleaming technocracies of the East Coast. He doesn't like to talk about China. On his torso he has a map of China in scars. His left eye was thumbed out by a guard in a prison cell there.

Julian knows things, but sometimes Mila gets the impression he is exaggerating a little to impress her. The stories he tells about the First World can't possibly all be true. He wants her to like him, to admire him, to stay with him for his wisdom and skills. She wonders if he wants her in that way. But he's always kept his distance and protected her. Guardedly, she trusts him. He is a good man.

And she has heard rumors of these phones in their heads before.

The next day, they leave the farmhouse and Julian begins talking again, picking up from where he left off the night before. Mila smiles. They've been traveling together for months, nearly a year in fact, and she is used to his oddities.

"The weakness they have," he tells her, "is that they have no crime. They have no poverty, they have no . . . you know, political problems."

They are walking along a country lane. A rusted tangle of

twisted metal and cabling fills the field to their right. An old pylon, brought down during one of the countless wars. Something squeaks in the wind as it swings back and forth. Mila wrinkles her nose at a sudden vile stench, brought their way by the breeze.

“Why is that a weakness?” she asks, squinting up at the blood-red sun, hanging low and bloated over the horizon. It seems to shimmy a little as it sinks, like a fat lady lowering herself onto a stool. Mila is aware that the sun hasn’t always looked that color. It is the emissions that make it look this way. It used to be bright yellow, her teacher told her, in a pale blue sky, and Julian claims it looks like that on the Isles. Mila can’t imagine it. To her, the sun is dark orange, or red, in a purple sky.

“It’s a weakness,” Julian tells her, “because once you’re in, you’re in. Nobody suspects you; everything’s free. You can live where you want, eat what you want. Get drunk, chase the ladies.” He laughs, a little self-consciously.

“They threw you out twice,” she points out. He is easy to tease, thick-skinned and good-natured.

“Yes, this is true,” Julian says. “I may have got a bit carried away. Let myself down.”

“They have libraries there, don’t they?” Mila asks after a while. She’s heard all about them so many times, she can picture them in her head. Big red buildings filled with books. Unlimited access to everywhere on the Web, all the information in the world. The thought makes her dizzy sometimes.

“Yes. And you know what they don’t have?” Julian says. “CCTV. No monitoring, nothing.”

“Why not?” Mila asks. The rank smell is getting worse. She breathes shallowly, not wanting to take in more of the foul air than necessary.

“They have two political parties,” Julian goes on. If he’s noticed the smell he is ignoring it. “One of the parties calls for more privacy, the other calls for less. That’s the only thing they argue about.”

He stops, holding out an arm to let Mila know she should follow suit. Following his gaze she sees a tumbled pile of military-green metal

lying in the field. It is half crushed by the fallen pylon. It takes her a moment to make sense of the shape but then she recognizes it as a Waldo. An armored, walking monster operated from within by a man. The smell is worse now and Mila guesses the source of the smell is the corpse of the luckless soldier within the mechanical beast.

Julian is cautious. "Sometimes they have automated weapon systems," he explains. "They keep firing even when the operator is dead."

He moves slowly, watching for movement from the machine, but there is nothing. He beckons Mila and they continue, grateful to escape the stench of death. It has been like this ever since they left Köls. Twisted, burned-out war machines. Collapsed houses and destroyed churches. Ordinary people struggling to survive. Starving refugees wandering aimlessly, ending up in camps or worse. Mila and Julian have had to escape from such places more than once.

"A few years ago," says Julian, continuing his potted history of the Isles, "the Privacy Party got in and took away all the cameras. They said everyone's recording everything on their phones anyway, so why bother. So once we're in, no one's going to be able to follow us. I'm not going to get caught this time."

"But won't we need phones?" Mila asks. One of her soles is flapping a little, and makes a rhythmic beat as she walks. Step, swish-step, step, swish-step. "You told me everyone has a phone. And without one you can't live there."

Julian nods. "Yes," he says. "That's true. But you can get phones illegally, of course."

"From where? From a camp?" She glances over at him and he shakes his head. His face is filthy. They stink. She can smell him; she can smell herself. How can they get onto the Isles like this?

"Not from a camp on this side," he says. "It needs to be a phone from the Isles. That's how they know if you're a Citizen or not. It's not easy. They're all coded. You see, when someone is born, they create a phone specifically for that person. When the child is, I don't know, six or so, it gets implanted. The tech will get upgraded, replaced many times, but the code, the phone number—that stays the same always."

“So they know how many people there are, and how many numbers there are?”

“Yes. Getting the phone is not so hard. But if you don’t have a registered number, then it doesn’t work. You can’t get food or shelter. The Agency comes to find you and they send you back. Or somewhere else.”

“So how do you get them? Phone numbers?”

Julian doesn’t answer for a while. They keep walking. Step, swish-step.

Unable to wait for a response, Mila prompts him. “Do you steal them? From factories? Or off the Web?”

Julian seems to be thinking. He says nothing. Mila sniffs. “If you don’t know . . .”

He stops suddenly and stands in the middle of the road. She stops too, a few paces on and turns to look at him, standing in his rags on the cracked, pitted tarmac. A mess of a man, but her only hope.

“They get them from babies,” Julian says. “Babies who die.”

Mila purses her lips and shuts her eyes, closing herself off from the distasteful thought.

“If the baby dies then they don’t give the number to someone else,” he says. Mila wishes he would stop. “The baby is buried with it. You can hack into the list of the numbers and assign it to new, illegal hardware.”

“You steal the identity of a dead child?” Mila asks, arms folded, angry at him for even knowing about such a thing.

Julian nods.

“Why not an adult? Adults die too.”

“Because the phone number is associated with a Citizen. If you use the number of someone else, even if they’re dead, all their old records come up, all their old pictures, videos, conversations. I told you, Mila, they record everything; they show their whole lives to each other on the Web.”

Mila thinks about this. She can’t imagine why anyone would want other people to watch everything they did. But she could imagine maybe wanting to watch others.

“So if you take on the phone number of an adult,” she says slowly, “you take on their whole life, all their history, all their baggage.”

“Yes,” Julian says. “That’s why you need a baby’s number. Unfortunately, not so many babies die on the Isles.”

Mila winces. “I didn’t mean it like that,” Julian says, embarrassed. “I don’t want babies to die. Just . . . I’m just saying.”

Mila nods. She understands. One of the things she’s learned during this never-ending journey is that you just have to take the opportunities life presents. If the rules are set against you, then you have to cheat a little, just to even things up. There is no room for sentimentality in a dying world.

They carry on walking.

“But don’t they check?” Mila asks. “Don’t they realize that the phone number you’re using belongs to a baby that died?”

“I told you,” Julian replies. “They’re weak. Not many police and hardly any cameras. At least, not security cameras. They spend their whole time watching each other, sharing everything they do. The last thing they suspect is a secret. As long as there aren’t a bunch of old pictures of you looking like someone else on your phone memory, they don’t go digging.”

He stops as a bird takes flight from within a dark stand of trees to their left. Birds aren’t common, and Mila has noticed Julian seems fascinated by them. The bird, a large black specimen, flaps off toward the mid-morning sun and Julian turns his attention back to the conversation.

“Of course, if you screw up—you know, kill someone or something else dumb—then they’ll start to probe and they’ll catch you. But they have these Privacy Laws.” He sniffs.

“You say that as if it’s a bad thing,” Mila says, wondering what it might be like to have a little privacy once in a while.

“No,” Julian replies. “Not for us, anyway.”

The kitchen down the hall was a stark contrast to the interview room. Fat leather sofas, mood lighting, walls decorated with huge black-and-white images which changed when you weren’t looking.

“Remind me, is this your first day on the job?” Rebecca asked

as Adam ordered coffees. A semi-intelligent, or SEMINT, barista whirred into life, pulling levers, pressing buttons, flipping cups gently onto saucers.

"No," Adam replied, sighing inwardly.

"She's running rings around you."

"She doesn't want to talk," Adam shrugged.

"You fancy her, don't you? You like those Slavic girls? Sharp cheekbones."

"Jesus, leave me alone. Who cares, anyway?" he said, turning to her. "She's going to get sent off somewhere on a Hulk. We'll never see her again."

"She may have something," Rebecca said. "She's got an air about her. . . ."

"Do you fancy her?" Adam asked.

Rebecca sucked in air sharply.

"We've been asked to pay special attention to this girl," she said. "Considering where she was found, and who they found nearby."

"Who's asked us?" Adam asked. "The Minister?"

Rebecca said nothing.

"My god, it is the Minister," he said. "No wonder you're being so intense."

"Look, Adam," she hissed. "I know you've had some . . . tough times lately, but all we're asking for is a little professionalism, okay? You have a job to do. Everyone has to make a Contribution. This is yours; do it properly or you'll get a flag."

Adam passed a latte to Rebecca and lifted his own to his nose, closing his eyes at the scent, relishing the bitter-sweet memories it produced. For an instant, he was at home in London and Clara was with him, laughing, bright with happiness.

He opened his eyes to find Rebecca studying him doubtfully.

"Can you handle this?" she asked. "Or should I get someone else?"

"I'll be fine. . . . I am fine," he said quickly. He sipped his coffee. "I'll get something useful, I promise."

"Just find out how she got in, okay?" Rebecca said. "I'd do it myself, but now I'm established as the bad cop. . . ."

He nodded. "I know."

"Come on," she said, more gently this time. "Let's have another crack before lunch."

They set down their cups and a robot arm whipped them off the table.

If it were up to me, I'd just let them stay, Adam thought as they returned to the interview room. Maybe not all of them. Not the violent ones, or the ones who won't wash. But I'd let this one stay. He was careful to check his settings were on "hide." These were not the sort of thoughts an Agent of the Security Ministry should be having, much less Showing.

Rebecca was waiting for him at the door. With a nod she indicated he should go first.

Adam applied a new smile before turning the handle and opening the door.

Mila reckoned she had around four and a half minutes after Adam and Rebecca left the room.

There were two reasons they might leave a room mid-interview. The most likely was that they wanted to chat about tactics, in which case they tended to grab a coffee while they did so. She knew this by the smell of their breath and the mocha moustache Adam sported when they returned. If so, she had just under five minutes.

The other possibility was that they were leaving her to stew, in hopes that boredom would loosen her tongue. Sometimes these stewing periods lasted an hour, which would be plenty of time to get up to no good, assuming they didn't send in a blank-faced guard to keep an eye on her. This close to lunch, though, it was unlikely. She had to be back for the lunchtime roll call. Their adherence to the rules made them predictable, and predictability was a weakness, as Julian would have said.

Coffee it was.

Lifting it off the ground, so as not to scrape it, Mila moved

a chair to the far wall, where the clock hung. She climbed up. The clock came off the wall easily, hanging, as it was, on a short nail. This surprised Mila a little; she'd expected some kind of over-engineered fixing tech. Magno-Grip perhaps, or newly patented Wall-Suck. It seemed even the Isles-dwellers still knew the value of good old-fashioned nails.

Mila stepped off the chair and took the clock to the table, laying it face down. She smiled with relief to see the back plate was fitted into a groove, rather than held on with screws. She slid it out and examined the insides.

In the center there was a rectangular block, which held the timing mechanism. That was no use to her, but next to it was a larger, sealed block made of plastic with wires attached. The battery. She'd seen this sort of battery before, in Frankfurt. She knew that a tiny fusion power plant nestled inside. The end result of thousands of years of human endeavor. Unlimited, free energy, packed into an object she could hold in her palm. And what did the Isles-dwellers use it for? To run an old-fashioned clock they didn't even need except to annoy Applicants.

Mila eased the block out of its casing. Turning it over, she smiled again as she saw a keypad and display screen. A lot of the newer tech didn't bother with these. Since everyone on the Isles had a phone capable of accessing the bios and adjusting the settings, strictly speaking keypads were virtually obsolete, as everything was connected via the Web.

She disconnected the wires from the timing mechanism with a sharp tug. Then she unzipped her all-in-one and tucked the battery into her underwear.

Next she eased the timing mechanism out and laid it on the table beside the clock. Using her fingernails, she pulled the thin face of the clock up and off the central pin. Underneath were the hands themselves. She yanked them off and slid them down the leg of her overalls and into her sock.

Mila zipped herself up and began replacing the components.

Suddenly she heard a noise outside in the corridor. She stopped, holding her breath, her heart pumping. Nothing. Someone passing, perhaps. She returned to the clock, jamming the face back over the pin, then the powerless timing mechanism over that. She replaced the back panel, finding it trickier than it had been to remove. This was always this way. It always took longer to put things back together than to take them apart.

But finally she'd done it. The clock reassembled, she wiped the dripping sweat from her forehead and stepped back onto the chair. Still over a minute to spare, she judged, though she no longer had a functioning clock to confirm it. She rested the clock back on the nail and stepped down again.

Immediately the clock dropped off the nail and fell toward the floor.

Mila shot out a hand, jamming it against the wall, arresting the slide. You are a cat, she heard Julian say. You are young, quick with your mind and your hands. This is your most valuable attribute. She breathed hard. If she were caught trying to steal the clock components, they wouldn't bother talking to her anymore. She'd be categorized as a criminal element and put on the first Hulk. She'd end up enslaved in some South American canning factory, or in a sub-continental sweatshop, dead by thirty from a thousand emission-zone cancers. Once we're in, Julian had said, do what you must to stay there. For me, it's not so bad. I'm an ugly old man. I will survive. You are a beautiful young girl. You have so much to gain by staying on the Isles; so much to lose by leaving.

Mila examined the nail. Broken. Only a stub remained. So much for old tech. What wouldn't she give now for some Magno-Grip. What would Julian do? He'd probably yank off a table leg and fight his way out. No. She remembered his words. You can always do something to improve your position. You can always score a point. Try to win the set, even if you can't win the match. It might not be obvious at first, but there will always be a way.

She calculated she had less than half a minute.

Then it came to her. A way to turn this to her advantage. Setting

the clock on the table, facedown, she used a fingernail to pick at the soft plastic lip, sharpening it until it stood proud. She stood on the chair again and carefully, oh so carefully, she rested the sharpened lip on the stub of nail still protruding from the wall. It held, just. Slowly, cautiously, she stepped down off the chair, watching the clock all the time, looking for a quiver, a flicker of movement, ready to catch it. She replaced the chair and shuffled on tiptoe around the desk.

She heard footsteps outside. She sat and held her breath.

The door opened. Adam walked in, smiling brightly. Rebecca following, a scowl on her face. Mila tried not to watch the door slam shut, the walls shake. She looked away as the clock fell again from its precarious perch and she tried to look surprised as it shattered on the floor, plastic and Perspex flying across the room.

“Jesus Christ,” Rebecca said, kicking a piece of plastic that had had the temerity to end up near her foot. “Stupid old tech.”

Mila tried not to grin.

2

They weren't prisoners or inmates. They were known officially as Applicants. Once captured, they were made to sign a form, which, in theory, allowed them to apply for temporary residency, the right to stay and work, or Contribute, as they called it here. According to Julian, and the brief discussions she'd had with other Applicants, Citizens also Contributed, but they didn't have to do much if they didn't want to. There was no shortage of anything in the First. Production, distribution and services were largely automated, SEMINTs did the really unpleasant work: cleaning and maintenance, farming, laboring, wiping the arses of the infirm.

The form, in reality, was a legal nicety, giving the State the power to deport anyone it didn't like the look of, or to hold them indefinitely if it saw some advantage in doing so. Signing the form meant sacrificing any right to privacy, something they took seriously here. They could watch you twenty-four seven once you'd signed. The toughest, most troublesome Applicants were fitted with a dumb-phone so they could be monitored more easily.

"Why do they bother interviewing us at all?" asked Maya over lunch. They ate in a huge hall, at long tables, in shifts monitored by a dozen or so guards. The food was basic, but to Mila, who'd never had enough to eat before in her life, each meal was a feast. She had

already noticed she was filling out a little, after just eight days in the Center. That was fine though. It wasn't going to be a problem. Not after tonight.

"This is what they do," Juno replied. "They love to find out about other people. They hate that we have no phones. They can't find out everything about us so they have to ask questions."

Maya and Juno had arrived at the Center with Mila. They had all been subjected to lengthy, regular interviews, though it had become clear over the last few days that Mila was getting more attention than the others.

All three had been caught on the same morning, close to the town known as Bridgehead. They'd all come over the bridge. Maya and Juno had come on a vehicle, Mila guessed, though they hadn't discussed it for fear of being overheard by a guard or a spy. Maya and Juno probably assumed Mila had crossed the same way, helped by a trafficking gang, or just stowing away. As far as Mila was aware, only she had ever successfully crossed using the cables. It seemed important she didn't give the information away, at least not without something in return.

They had been kept overnight in a small cell, somewhere unidentified. A prison van had brought them to the Center the next day. Mila had no idea where it was within the Isles. They had driven on featureless motorways for two hours or so, before turning off the highway and winding their way along country roads to arrive finally at this giant white box. There had been no signs on the roads, no signals. The vehicles were all SEMINT, with a human operator as a fail-safe. Julian had told her some vehicles didn't have a human operator at all. If the vehicle's sat nav failed, the operator, assuming there was one, could always use his or her phone for directions. No one needed street signs on the Isles.

"Mila?" Maya asked, raising an eyebrow.

Mila shrugged. "I guess she's right. They want to find out where we come from, how we traveled so far. How we got onto the Isles."

"I heard that they don't care where we come from, they'll just put us on any old Hulk, going anywhere," Juno said, clearly miffed

that Maya had asked Mila for clarification. "Or else they send you to places where workers are needed. Horrible places."

"That's true, mostly," Mila said, hoping she didn't sound like she knew it all. "But it's not that simple. Look, sometimes they do let people stay. People who have special skills, people prepared to do the really awful jobs that can't be done by machines."

Juno was shaking her head. "Don't get your hopes up. I've never heard of anyone allowed to stay in any First-World state."

"I'm not saying that many get in," Mila said patiently, aware that Maya was staring, wide-eyed with hope. "And they don't advertise it. But I know for a fact that some are allowed to stay."

Their conversation was interrupted by a screeching of chairs and a chorus of shouts. A fight had broken out. A ring formed quickly around the two women involved. Juno stood on a table to get a better view.

"That big girl's got hold of the one with the frizzy hair," she reported.

Mila closed her eyes. She'd seen enough fighting. The Center wasn't nearly as violent as some she'd been in. In an overcrowded camp outside Prague, she'd seen a woman's eyes gouged out by another for stealing food. She was left, crawling and mewling, blood pouring from her eye sockets for more than an hour before the blank-faced guards came and took her away. Mila, like all the others, had been too scared to offer help, unwilling to show solidarity with a thief. She thought of that incident often, wondering where the poor woman was now. Probably dead. That might be for the best.

As she opened her eyes, the guards arrived and the circle opened up to let them in. A red-headed girl, overweight, was smashing a smaller girl's head into the ground. She had a curiously detached look on her face, as though she were pounding corn, thinking about supper.

One of the guards pulled a long strip from his belt and whipped it down onto the redhead's wrist, where it coiled around of its own accord, and dropping the free end, which flailed about for an instant, searching for the other wrist. The redhead seemed hardly