

Stay Hungry, Stay Choosy: A Dystopian Novel

based on insights from critical ethnographic research on

The Overeducated and Underemployed in Italy and the United Kingdom

A thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

by

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ABSTRACT

This creative writing thesis consists of a full-length novel, *Stay Hungry, Stay Choosy*. The premise of the novel is that, by 2050, Italy will be a de jure gerontocracy that cannibalises its young. This thesis contributes to research on moral panics as it brings to the fore the voices of the voiceless and further explores the locus of youth unemployment in the discussion on social deviance. Thus, the thesis explores how Erich Goode and Nachman Ben-Yehuda's (1994) moral panics theory explains the mono-narrative of young people's transition from education to employment in Italy and the United Kingdom. In my academic research, I use a critical paradigm based on the fundamental premise that creative writing should play a key role in the liminal place that bridges social research and social activism.

The research is framed by a number of social theories, underpinning the public discourse on youth overeducation, unemployment and underemployment. Subsequently, an in-depth analysis is carried out, using the lens of Goode and Ben-Yehuda's moral panics framework, in order to show how the pervasive dichotomy of the angry youth and the aboulitic youth in public discourse is used to stereotype the young and to maintain the power dynamics between both generations and socio-economic classes. Thirdly, Urbanski's 'rhetorical circle' (1975) is shown to be the explanatory metaphor that allows speculative fiction writers, such as Anthony Burgess and Marco Bosonetto, to draw upon pervasive social fears about the young, creatively elaborate upon them and hold up a mirror to readers by incorporating these fears into storytelling. These theoretical concepts are then explored from the perspective of young people, through ethnographic inquiry.

Finally, the research outcomes are filtered through the process of self-reflexivity in order to illustrate the choices I had to make in order to complete the present novel in a way that respects both the conventions of the speculative writing genre and draws upon research findings. This thesis thus contributes to the case that creative writing has a key role to play in linking social science findings to practice by drawing concepts and findings together in a coherent narrative. This thesis turns this literary call to action into a real-life manifesto.

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PREFACE

My thesis has two parts: an academic research study on overeducation and underemployment in the United Kingdom and Italy and a novel titled *Stay Hungry, Stay Choosy* that draws upon the findings of my academic research. The research responds to a number of gaps in knowledge:

1. Around the world, young people's school-to-work transition is increasingly problematic. Within the European Union, there is a North-South dimension to this phenomenon, with Northern economies such as the UK performing better than Southern economies such as Italy when it comes to 'matching' the supply of educated young people to the demands of the labour market. This performance is measured, among other tools, by using the UN ILO metric 'youth unemployment rate'. By this standard, in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis, youth unemployment had reached an all time high globally and consequently an explanation was put forward under the concept of Skills Gap which I refer to in my research as 'the mono-narrative'.
2. Despite the plurality of disciplines studying young people's experiences of school-to-work transition, there is very little inter-disciplinary research. The majority of knowledge and policy solutions are based on findings from quantitative studies from the field of economics.
3. Moreover, recently, the phenomena of overeducation and underemployment have been documented, however faulty methodologies prevent us from having a comprehensive picture of how they impact young people's transition to the world of work. Public discourse remains focused on the youth unemployment rate and the Skills Gap, however we seem to be addressing the wrong problem and thus come up with imperfect solutions.
4. Also, very little research has taken into consideration the voices of young people, with employers dominating the discourse.
5. Finally, creative writing, specifically speculative writing, could be better positioned in supporting inter-disciplinary research, both from a methodological perspective but also from the perspective of communicating academic research findings.

My academic research has tackled the issue of the dominant narrative, or as I argue, the mono-narrative of the Skills Gap as the key issue preventing young people from entering and thriving in the labour market. I argue in my thesis that this mono-narrative was created by power holders and puts the burden of proof on young people. Despite the lack of consensus of what the Skills Gap means (Bessen, 2014), public discourse is reinforcing the idea that young people need to be “fixed”, often through the “right” choice of tertiary education, such as a STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Maths) rather than an Arts degree (EU STEM Coalition, 2015). By the time young people graduate, they have already internalised the mono-narrative and feel not good enough. The mono-narrative alludes to a perfect path that each young person should be on and falling short of it (e.g being unemployed, overeducated, underemployed) is due to an individual choice and is therefore an individual responsibility.

My research aims to

- 1) reveal how the aforementioned mono-narrative is an instrument that enables power holders to maintain power structures and serves to oppress young people;
- 2) how young people assign meaning to their experiences within this mono-narrative;
- 3) how creative writing can contribute to challenging the mono-narrative and add to inter-disciplinary research on young people’s school-to-work transitions.

My research has a qualitative design based on a critical paradigm, drawing on critical theory and aiming to critique the neo-liberal discourse that frames the issue of youth unemployment, overeducation and underemployment. The neo-liberal assumptions are that participants have perfect information about the market and that the market will reach a equilibrium with supply meeting demand. I highlight the power asymmetry in the market by using a moral panics¹ framework, then value the multiplicity of views and emancipatory dialogue with participants, co-critiquing the mono-narrative about The Skills Gap and then I wrote up the results of my critical ethnography as a ‘story’, a full-length novel entitled *Stay Hungry, Stay Choosy* drawing on the results of my academic research within the constraints of speculative fiction.

¹ **Definition:** ‘a condition, episode, person or group of persons emerges to become defined as a threat to societal values and interest’ (Cohen 1972, p. 9, cited in Goode & Ben Yehuda, 2009, p. 23). Please see page 319 for an overview of the moral panics theoretical framework used in this thesis.

Critical Reflections on the Novel: *Stay Hungry, Stay Choosy*

If we take the principle of reflexivity enunciated by the Thomas theorem to be true, i.e., ‘if men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences’ (Merton 1995, p.380), then all speculative fiction has the potential to be interpreted as applied reflexivity. Thus, I will explain the creative choices that I have made in my novel, *Stay Hungry, Stay Choosy*, through a reflexive account of my academic research.

The novel is set in Italy, thus I have drawn most of my insights from academic research done in Italy; however, where applicable, I will mention where I have drawn on UK-related research.

Self-reflexive critique of academic research informing the creative choices for the novel

When I started my research in 2011, I had a reasonably clear idea about my research topic, but it took a very long time before the novel started to emerge from the insights derived from the research process. At first, I tried to link the plot to geography, to make it somehow relevant for both the UK and Italy, since the two worlds seemed to be so far apart. At first, no amount of trying enabled me to fit ‘the square peg’ of research into ‘the round hole’ of the creative plot. Yet, thousands of words later, both written and scrapped, the two worlds that I researched started to come together, sometime in 2013. Then, in 2014, the news emerged in the British newspapers that there was a mass migration of young, educated Italians to England. For the first time, their preferred destination was no longer Germany, but England, and more precisely, London. The media portrayal of this graduate migration was romanticised: ‘Young Italians abandon la dolce vita to move to Britain’ in *The Telegraph* (Squires, 2014); ‘Young Italians flock to London’ in *The Spectator* (Chancellor, 2014); ‘Why Italians in London aren’t here to live off the government’s benefits’ in *The Huffington Post* (Are, 2015). According to *The Telegraph* article, which quoted the official Italian report on migration published annually by the organisation Migrantes (Squires, 2014), 94,000 Italians (a third of whom were aged between 18 and 34) moved abroad in 2013, a 16 % increase over 2012, with the largest number (13,000) choosing London. The article went on to note that ‘this is the age group which has been most affected by the dire rates of unemployment, suffering from a jobless rate of more than 40 per cent.’

By that point, I knew that I wanted to write a dystopian novel, and I knew I wanted to have an Italian protagonist. I was inspired by the popular appeal of *The Hunger Games* (Collins, 2008) trilogy and the *Divergent* trilogy (Roth, 2011) and admired their protagonists. I knew I wanted the hero of my novel to be female, since the face of underemployment in Italy is predominantly female. However, I knew Alida, the protagonist of *Stay Hungry, Stay Choosy*, could not be similar to Katniss Everdeen and Tris Prior, the fearless heroines from these American young adult dystopian novels. I wanted her to read authentically to an Italian readership and thus gave her recognisable features consistent with the cultural make up of Italian society as well as Italian readers' expectations. Both Katniss and Tris demonstrate significant agency. In contrast, Alida wavers throughout the novel in search of hers. She struggles to break through the layer upon layer of Italian traditional patriarchal relationships, and her agency remains underdeveloped until the end of the novel, strongly echoing insights from my academic research.

I will unpack below the creative choices I have made along the way and I will explain how the awareness of my potential readership as well as the insights from my academic research have influenced some of these choices and sometimes have obliged me to make U-turns.

Genre

Commenting on student protests unfolding at the time in Italy, former Prime Minister Giuliano Amato prophetically stated, 'I do not like the word "decline", but this is a sign of decline...I recall Petronius, who sang the end of the Roman Empire when Rome was burning...The youth protests are...against a general situation in which the old generations have eaten the future of the young generations' (Cazzullo, 2010, p.1). This description is consistent with the elements of the collapse of a civilisation, including the Roman Empire, as outlined in *Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed* (Diamond, 2006, p. 23).

Two things struck me at the time: first, that the erstwhile aboulic young people of Italy were finally rebelling and second, the use of a cannibalisation metaphor (in the original Italian, 'mangiato il futuro' or 'consumed the future'). The use of this metaphor recalls the story of Cronus in Greek mythology and stands for 'the past consuming the future' or, more concretely, 'the older generation suppressing the next generation' (Dronke and Marenbok, 2001, p.316).

This type of discourse is familiar territory for writers of speculative fiction: seeping through public discourse, there are warnings of the collapse of a civilisation.

From a historical anthropological perspective, Italy displays all the symptoms of a collapsing civilisation. Thus, from a creative writing perspective, I needed to find the most appropriate genre to capture these elements.

It was clear that dystopia would be the most suitable genre in which to write my story, following Krishan Kumar's definition that dystopia 'pick[s] out the most distinctive and novel features' of each time and 'present[s] them in the form of an imaginatively realised society' (Kumar, 2013, cited in Vieira, 2013, p.3). I have then used the Juvenile organ recycling system as a concretisation of the cannibalisation metaphor.

Valentina Fulginiti (2012) charted forty Italian novels published between 2000 and 2011 that she found marked a turn in Italian dystopian novels, and a break from a past in which there was a lack of respectability for the genre, leading Italian writers of dystopia to hide behind English pen names. She also noted that these novels were written during the 'cultural hegemony' of Berlusconi and thus many of them focussed on central male characters, all of whom represented his fictional alter-egos (Fulginiti, 2012, p.2).

Although the Gerontocrat leader in my novel is called *Il Principe* (and one might argue that the nickname given to Berlusconi, *Il Cavaliere*, was a reference point), I did not choose to focus on a male character or on the one with the most power in my society, although it might have been an obvious choice under the circumstances. I had two reasons for my decisions; first, I wanted to explore the point made by Fulginiti when quoting the scholar Robert Rushing, who talked about the 'connection between cannibalism and male control over the female body' (Fulginiti, 2012, p.7). The scholar argued that 'it is not precisely the future of humanity that we are talking about, but rather more properly, the future of men. Men who show themselves at every turn to be less than deserving of a future' (Fulginiti 2012, pp.7-8). The Gerontocrats' rule over Italy represents for me the metaphor for patriarchal relations in Italy, while the desire of the Gerontocrats for immortality is the desire of the ruling classes to reproduce themselves, admitting into their political midst exclusively elderly, white men.

This insight marked a turning point in my writing. I distanced myself from exploring a pure dystopian world and tried to extrapolate past and present patriarchal relationships and project them into the future. I realised that I was essentially writing speculatively about gender and female agency, drawing on Margaret Atwood's definition that speculative fiction narratives 'interrogate social organisation by showing what things

might be like if we rearranged them' (Atwood, 2011, p.62), with a specific application in reconsidering gender structures (e.g Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *Herland* and John Wyndham's *Consider Her Ways and Others*).

Thus, my choice of a protagonist—a young woman instead of a young man—was purposeful. Alida represents the oppressed gender in Italy in addition to the oppressed age category. It is only her rebellion that can challenge the oppression; the young men have the potential to be corrupted, as they can be lured by the promise that one day they will be admitted into the political circles of the ruling class.

The Protagonist

Alida is 33, and she was born into privilege. Initially, I wanted her to be a typical *bambocciona*², according to the moral panics, folk-devil stereotype. However, after analysing Candido's motivation as a character, I realized that it was simply not going to work because my protagonist would lack agency.

The first drafts for my protagonist did not work. A protagonist without agency cannot carry the story, and thus I had to reconsider her character arc. At the same time, I did not want to paint a fake picture of a *bambocciona* who saves the world. As mentioned earlier, an Italian Tris or Katniss would have been perceived as inauthentic by my potential Italian readership. I needed to keep some key features of a young woman raised in an Italian, patriarchal family. Alida has a hard time becoming the heroine of the story.

First, rebelling against the State means rebelling against her father, which is decidedly taboo in a society that is 'founded on the family', an insight from one of my ethnographic interviews (Appendix 2), which I have also referenced in my novel.

Second, the choice imposed on her by mother, and by society – to take the easy way out and marry, is a choice she struggles with throughout the novel. She rejects Marco's proposal and that feels like a personal triumph; however, her ambivalent feelings towards Otto stem from feelings of incompleteness without a male figure in her life. Her inner struggle to become self-sufficient and trust her own strength (which is a stop-start endeavour throughout the story) consists of a double challenge.

Thus, the alternative to the family and the spouse for a young person is increasingly the group of friends. The 'angry Millennial tribe' (Bennett, 2016) appealed to me. Her childhood friend, Otto, is the leader of such a tribe, called The Bloody Brigades.

² From Italian: *bamboccione* (sg, m); *bambocciona* (sg, f); *bamboccioni* (pl). Own Translation: Big baby(ies).

Although initially I thought Otto could be her love interest, again, it was impossible to make Alida focus on romance. At some point during the many re-writes of the character, it became very clear that a romance would be a distraction and would not help the story. Although there is an undercurrent of affection between the two characters, it is never fully explained or explored. I cannot be sure whether I was influenced by the multiple articles I have read of Millennials' disinterest in romanticism, for example: (Alter, 2015) and (Davis, 2016) but there was something about their friendship being more valuable or more valued than romance that kept emerging from the interaction between these two characters.

The Bloody Brigades, the tribe that adopts her, is a nod to the *Brigate Rosse* (Red Brigades) in operation in Italy between 1970 and 1988, during which time they undertook many violent acts such as kidnappings, assassinations and bomb explosions. The Bloody Brigades is a very small group of young people, all extremely well educated and skilled, who are carving out a violent identity in opposition to the Gerontocrats, but their allegiances shift through infiltrations and betrayals. Their existence is potentially tolerated and even incentivised by the Gerontocrats because it justifies the further oppression and control of young people.

Alida is therefore never ideologically allied with the Brigades until she gets to Triage where she understands that the Gerontocrats spare no one; Miranda and Marco's capture and ordeals make her understand that she can either continue to believe that the system can protect her and that someone, somewhere, has an explanation that makes sense (her father, in this case). Alternatively, she can choose to act and make her own moral choices, one event at a time, regardless if, in the process, she may need to make unpalatable choices.

Title

The title of my novel, *Stay Hungry, Stay Choosy*, draws on two sources:

- The word 'choosy' was used in an interview by Elsa Fornero, the Italian Minister of Welfare quoted widely by Italian television outlets and the online media: 'Young people should not be choosy about work' (*Corriere della Sera*, 2012). This statement generated public debate, and the English word 'choosy' gained symbolic status in Italy on par with *bamboccioni*.
- The entire title is a paraphrase of Steve Jobs' statement to 'stay hungry, stay foolish' in his Stanford University commencement address (Jobs, 2005).

The intended meaning of the phrase is to remind young people that the labels that they are given, such as ‘choosy’, may not be completely value-free. Also, the word ‘hunger’ is used as a symbol of oppression: being sated means being fed by a system that may not have your best interests at heart and thus staying hungry may be an act of rebellion (i.e., actively refusing to touch the hand that feeds you misleading information or a false sense of financial security).

Academic research insights that fed into the narrative

The Blood Line

One of the things that struck me when I was doing research was how often the phrase ‘Italy is a Republic based on Labour’ (Article 1 of the Italian Constitution) is tossed around in public debates on youth unemployment. The conversation will then revolve around this phrase but quickly become sterile and go around in circles.

I have raised this issue with my Italian interviewees and the question elicited sarcasm, given the general perception that the phrase was now meaningless despite the general use. One of the respondents, quoted in Appendix 2 illustrated how this phrase stood for the lack of class mobility before the economic boom of the nineties: ‘the son of a butcher would become a butcher; the son of a lawyer would become a lawyer. There was no interclass mobility. It was as if they had internalised that they didn’t have the cultural means within the family to have their children do something else.’

I decided to ask my respondents to define this phrase. Each of them had different interpretations of the meaning. Publicly, the phrase is used as a safety net and an excuse. Privately, it is either seen as devoid of meaning or obsolete. The most interesting interpretation of the phrase came from one respondent, who said that Italy was not founded on labour but that it was founded on ‘the family.’ I found that extremely insightful, especially in light of the words of the former Italian Minister of Social Affairs, Elsa Fornero: ‘Italy does not only have a generational divide, but it also has a gender divide and a North-South divide as well’ (*Girlfriend in a Coma*, 2012). Thus, the family structure is the key to understanding Italian culture. Also, in this context, the family-based *raccomandazioni*³ make sense as they vouch for the good name of the family of origin. There was a lot of ambivalence regarding the *raccomandazioni* among the respondents; however, it is clear that they still exist. On the

³ From Italian: Raccomandazione (sg), Raccomandazioni (pl). Own Translation: Personal Reference(s).

invisible marketplace of favours being exchanged between families, these *raccomandazioni* are considered to have lost the power of their currency over time. Many respondents tried to downplay the negative connotations of the *raccomandazioni*. Several British respondents also mentioned instances in which their ‘connections’ were very important in finding a job. The element that differs between the UK and Italy is the role of family ties. In the UK, it was rarely a parent or relative that facilitated access to the job market, whereas in Italy, it was mostly people from the close family circle. I needed a strong family in my novel, and a *padre di famiglia*, so Antonio Cuneese, Alida’s father, was the natural candidate. He did not start out as Alida’s nemesis; initially I had thought of *Il Principe* as the villain, the one that Alida need to take on, but as I started writing and processing my interviews, I kept coming back to the idea that the inter-generational struggle needed to be played out by characters within the family unit. On behalf of all young people who need to stand up to their parents, Alida simply needed to challenge her father if she were ever to see change in Italy. Antonio’s discovery that Alida is not his daughter is mutually earth-shattering, but for Alida, it is liberating. Whatever taboos about not harming her father had been holding her back, they were no longer there, and thus she manages to grow into her warrior self.

Bamboccioni, Anger, and Abulia

As mentioned earlier, ‘*bamboccionism*’, the state of being a *bamboccione* in the traditional sense was impossible for me to feature in my writing in a way that did not play into the stereotype of the aboullic *puer aeternus*⁴. The fact that all young people are recycled for their organs by the time they are 33 if they are not socially useful (e.g., through parenthood or income generation), implies that the Gerontocrats have responded to a natural tendency of young people to become *bamboccioni* by putting order into their lives (fixing them) and obliging them to fit into one of the cultural expectations—breeding or having a job.

The utilitarianism of today’s society, its obsession with purpose, informs this choice. In the Gerontocrats’ worldview, young people simply cannot be idle. Furthermore, they are a resource that cannot be wasted. The concept of *bamboccionism* is present in all the measures that are put in place against it. In the novel, Alida still lives with her parents, unlike the other Juveniles who live in dorms, but that is more related to class than to *bamboccionism*.

⁴ From Latin: Eternal Child; See full definition and the cultural context for the use of the word on page 355.

Aboulia, a word used to describe the generic behaviour of *bamboccioni* (see definition on page 361), is a neuro-behavioural condition associated with apathy (Stemmer & Whitaker 2008, p.204). It encapsulates a generation-wide lack of motivation and willingness to sacrifice. It was not an emotion I could easily fit into my novel, given that aboulia manifests itself, in many ways, as the absence of agency. What I found through my interviews was that even if young people are portrayed as aboulic, this is not objectively the case (see examples in Appendix 2). They all struggle with underemployment or with job searches, trying to find meaning and purpose for their lives, but this is not necessarily visible or acknowledged by adults who see their lack of routine and income as idleness.

Anger, on the other hand, was an easily stereotyped emotion. The image of the angry young man is so powerful in our collective imagery that it is difficult to do anger differently. I did not want Otto to be a typical angry young man, so I made him depressed and conflicted but driven by a sense of purpose, with a desire to leave something behind. He also had the feeling that he had nothing to lose. The members of the Bloody Brigades are comrades first and foremost, and they have a sense of purpose. They also have a sense of humour and look at ingenious ways to sabotage the system. They are not simmering with negativity, nor are they anti-system in a way that would make them easily relegated to one-dimensionality. All of them are morally complex, but their sense of belonging to the group is strong. In a way, they recreate *la famiglia*⁵ but without the pressure of conformism.

Split Labour Market

The idea of the ‘Good Wall’ came from listening to many discourses about building walls across Europe to keep migrants away, for instance (Zatat, 2016) and (Taylor A. , 2015). It also came from listening to the laments of Italian politicians that Italy is geographically challenged, i.e., too close to North Africa and too accessible for migrants arriving by sea (*Internazionale*, 2015) and (*Stranieri in Italia*, 2016). The crisis of labour is so intertwined with the discourse about migration in today’s society, with common tropes including migrants portrayed as barbarians and immigration described as invasion, that I felt compelled to use this imagery in my novel (specifically a protective physical wall around Italy meant to defend it against Barbarians, a term used for non-Italians in the book). Barbarians have a special

⁵ From Italian: la famiglia (sg) = the family

connotation in Italy because of the barbarian invasions during the Roman Empire; this cultural tag readily gets attached to current migrants as well. I use migrants as the focus of the scapegoating to show how the Gerontocrats divert the attention of the Juveniles to an outside threat, all the while exploiting both categories to their own advantage.

The Wall, while keeping people out, also keeps people in. It is a way of social control that is disguised as something positive—the Good Wall, wrapped up in national pride. The Good Wall, a concrete manifestation of nationalism and isolationism, is a projection within a magnetic field, displaying on loop, Italian works of art. The Security Sky is the ceiling of the Good Wall, a giant security monitoring device, also programmed with pleasing visual patterns for aesthetic purposes, in a similar attempt to cover up the intrusion into people's lives with something noble like art.

Fight for the Future – But What Does the Future Mean?

The discourses concerning youth unemployment operate within the conceptual framework of neoliberalism, with the idea of the invisible hand⁶ of the market regulating young people's transition from school to work firmly embedded within it. I have found very few scholars who mention the need to challenge this framework (Bessant 1995; Braun & Lauder 2006; Lauder et al. 2012), and I found even fewer interviewees. It was thus important to show that the young people in the book oppose the system and want a different future, but they do not know what that future looks like. They do not have a strong leader or plan. This was inspired by leaderless movements such as Occupy Wall Street (Editors, 2016).

Thus, in an Occupy Wall Street world of leaderless social movements, it feels that the only way to oppose the system is to join others who are discontented and to resist the desire to form hierarchies and plans. And yet somehow there is something missing. Perhaps a more vocal, more visionary Otto, her childhood friend and the informal, democratic leader of the Bloody Brigades, would have made for a stronger character. I chose a genuine reflection of what the leader of a young social movement might look like; in his commitment to democracy, he can come across as weak or indecisive.

Denouement: We Stand Together

⁶ Definition retrieved from the Financial Times Lexicon, at <http://lexicon.ft.com/Term?term=invisible-hand>: “Economic theory, posited by Scottish economist Adam Smith, that participants in a free market act out of self-interest and that their interaction with other participants will automatically produce the most favourable outcome for all concerned (i.e. the most productive and efficient exchange of goods and services).”

One of the options I grappled with, when choosing my critical paradigm, was whether to choose Marxist-feminism. It seemed like a logical choice, when dealing with patriarchal issues as well as oppression and class issues. However, during my research, I realised that Marx's pre-condition for a revolution, was the development by the oppressed of a 'class consciousness'. Thus, according to (Crossley, 2013),

Within the Marxist tradition 'class consciousness' refers to the awareness of itself as a class which the dominated class within capitalism, the proletariat, is predicted to arrive at, historically. When the proletariat become aware of themselves as a class and of their collective strength, Marx claims, they will rise up in revolution and overthrow their bourgeois masters.

Nonetheless, after my ethnographic interviews, I realised that this pre-condition did not hold and thus I couldn't use Marxism as critical framework. In UK and Italy alike, young people shared the perception that their situation is unique and it is their responsibility to overcome it. I needed a symbolic ending to my novel. However unoriginal, the ending is symbolic of the need for young people to realise that they are a class, and that they are oppressed. Thus, the idea of the denouement came to me as the only possible response to the 'divide et impera' strategy when it comes to youth unemployment: the need to stand together against the mono-narrative, regardless of age or other categorisation put in place to break down the idea of belonging to a common class.

Stepping into the Killing Fields together in order to destroy them is either a recipe for a mass suicide or an attempt to achieve something together in a leaderless way. The binary choice and the fact that there is really only one shot at it makes the choice difficult. At the end of the novel, Alida stands together with other young people and they all take the same step forward and share the risk of potential imminent death. In a leaderless movement, there is no individual hero, but each member of the collective needs to show up for the group to overcome the odds.

Self-Reflexivity

Growing up in Ceausescu's Romania and living through the fall of the Berlin Wall, with all the socio-economic changes that followed as well as the narratives that changed overnight, made me wary of any type of mono-narrative.

I have lived and worked in ten countries, and there is no topic other than youth unemployment that is described in such similar terms from Papua New Guinea to Italy and from the UK to Burundi. What I found extraordinary is that youth unemployment has been relegated to the domain of economics, and that very little multi-disciplinary research has either been carried out or discussed publicly, and that young people are consistently told that there is a skills gap and that no matter how hard they try to study and to get a degree, somewhere along the way there is something that they are not doing right. My ethnographic interviews with young people in both Italy and the UK show a number of false starts, career changes and individual struggles with making sense of one's calling and one's path. They also show a deeply internalised responsibility for their choices, for their successes and failures and for the range of opportunities or lack thereof that they have experienced.

As I carried out the research for my PhD, I also undertook a journey of self-discovery. I tried to imagine what the ideal, balanced market would look like, one in which the invisible hand of the market is indeed able to allocate jobs to people and people to jobs in an equitable way. I realised that my own country held the key.

Romania under Ceausescu was, in many ways, a dystopian society. The absolute, monolithically one-directional propaganda was fierce. I—we—lived in the best country on earth. We went to school for free. When it came to choosing a university degree, one needed to make a well-reasoned choice because universities had capped numbers, and thus entry was competitive. It was not uncommon for young people to stay at home four or five years, studying to get into 'tough' university courses such as medicine or into the Polytechnic. Once one graduated, there was an automatic allocation to vacancies throughout the country, based on one's exam results. The better the results, the more likely you were to get a job in the capital or an urban centre. Migration was strictly regulated. No one could simply 'move' to the capital. It was only possible through marriage, study, and in a few other exceptions. International travel was virtually prohibited. We did not have a Good Wall, but our borders were strictly patrolled. People died trying to escape overland to Hungary or crossing the Danube to Serbia. After the 1989 Revolution, when inflation exploded, prices spiralled out of control and unemployment was rife, the nostalgic, middle-aged population kept remembering 'the

good old times.’ How great it was back in the day, when things were taken care of, when there was a smooth flow from school to work, and people could afford to have a family on their incomes. It was a confrontation with another type of mono-narrative—the counter-story, the desire to return to the dystopian womb of the protective State. Then, at some point in my travels, I met a former senior executive from Ceausescu’s Central Planning Agency. She described how the entire lifecycle of each and every member of society had been mapped out and monitored. In many ways, that was interview 0 for me. It was the interview that opened my eyes to the world of my novel. In 1967 Ceausescu banned abortions and consequently Romania experienced a population boom, industrialisation, and a huge rural-urban migration. State control took over one’s life from womb to tomb. Government agencies controlled exactly how many people would move through the conveyor belt of education and flow into the labour market. Thus, multi-disciplinary teams oversaw population control: demographers, migration specialists (sociologists, anthropologists), economists, and education specialists. The number of university seats was capped to reflect the numbers of senior citizens in that particular profession who were scheduled to retire within the next four to five years. These numbers were accurately synchronised to ensure that the supply of graduates met the demand. Permanent jobs and automatic allocation of graduates to jobs paved the way to social stability, since the stress of finding a job was non-existent. If this is the type of society that managed to make the school-to-work transition smooth and made the invisible hand of the market an actual reality, operationalised through a multi-disciplinary Planning Agency, then is this the answer? Could we ever go back to that type of control and regulation? If we do not want that, then what does the invisible hand actually mean? Why does the discourse remain fragmentary and monolithic? Why, in our leaderless ways, do we not ask more questions about the story we are told about youth unemployment? My novel attempts to explore the answers to these questions, within the constraints of speculative fiction: What if our worst nightmares about youth and their roles in society became true?

Stay Hungry, Stay Choosy: A Dystopian Novel

Chapter 1

First, there was the song. “To everything, la-la-la. There is a season, la-la-la. A time to learn, a time to work. A time to live, a time to serve. A time, la-la, for your Foreclosure.” Sung by the gender-neutral digital voice of the Gerontocrat Government of New Italy. She first heard it on her morning run when the Security Sky was still a dark winter blue. The tempo was just right for the warm-down. What an ear-worm. She nodded along.

Then, a few weeks later, the first announcement. Her earpiece hissed into life when she was halfway through her spinal integrity set. “Juvenile life is not easy. All those exams, all those interviews. But you have done well, Alida Cuneese! Six internships this year! And you’re with Il Principe. Well done, Citizen Cuneese. You are on your way to full employment! Remember, internships are not forever. Work hard and you’ll get a proper job! Your Citizen score is 251 out of 500 points. Your current internship means you are not eligible for Foreclosure. I repeat your Citizen status: not eligible for Foreclosure. For more information on how to get extra points, press one. Stay alert for our next message.”

The Security Sky had faded into rat-grey for early spring—a flat, unappealing colour that made Alida think of the river Stura, swollen with mud after heavy rains, cutting through the heart of the town of Cuneo. She hated the spinal integrity set. It was the worst part of her Healthy Citizen programme. After her 30-year celebration, the

programmers upped her to ninety-second reps and she felt like throwing up her nutrition shake every time.

She was with her Designated Love Partner, Marco, on their Clean Air Break, when the message changed. They were taking their first rest stop at the viewing platform that offered a panorama of the valley below. The shadow of Monte Cervino, Italy's highest mountain, spread over the fields like a dark arrow, stretching out towards the pale buildings of the town. They were looking for their homes in the Historic Centre, under the spider's web of zip rails.

She squinted to get the buildings into focus before the mountain's shade reached them. The shadow was already swallowing the outskirts of the town and at that time of year, when the sky light was set to change rapidly, you could see the outline of the peak moving, eating up the toy-sized dormitory blocks one by one. The vastness of the mountain made her feel dizzy. She had to ground her feet consciously and grab Marco's arm so as not to lose her foothold. Her Juvenile Climb Team had their own name for it, Monte Nonno, Grandfather Mountain, because there was always snow on the peak, making it look like the ultimate Gerontocrat, four kilometres tall with silver hair and a thou-shall-not-pass attitude.

Nobody climbed Monte Cervino anymore. It was the last frontier, the only open border between New Italy and the rest of the United States of Europe. The mountain itself was a killer, so people believed that there were no e-guards up at the peak. The Good Wall and the Killing Fields that lay beyond it stopped when the rocky peak emerged from the slopes, leaving nature alone to keep Italy safe at the highest altitude. Monte Cervino had almost killed her father in his climbing days, or so he told his friends at dinner parties. Frightening but somehow magnetic, sometimes she felt as though she had to look at it, as if it was calling her. Had Marco noticed? Time to refocus, look at their beautiful home town.

“There we are,” he was saying. “I can see our trees. Look, Alida.”

“Great! Your house is such a landmark.” Don’t make him suspicious.

How would it feel to one day stand on top of the mountain and look down on Cuneo? See our world like a tiny toy village, the zip-rail cars buzzing like midges, the people on the streets like ants? Would she feel free if this miserable world was four kilometres below her? She shook her head, trying to get her bad ideas under control.

From where they were standing, at the first rest stop, she could distinguish the architecture of buildings quite clearly. Under the zip wires and the zapping cars taking Gerontocrats on their very important duties, it was easy to find Marco’s family palace, a villa from the Mussolini period with a massive portico, standing on its own among a park full of trees.

Her family lived in a penthouse on Berlusconi Square. It was easy to spot when there was light because of the reflections from the long windows on the roof terrace.

Marco was saying, “Aren’t you proud to be an Italian, Alida? Just think, we are the heirs to the greatest human civilisation. We really are. We inherit the best of the Roman empire, the laws, the government, the art and the architecture. Our ancestors have conquered all the inferior civilisations in the world. And here in Cuneo, we can keep it all safe for the Italians of the future. Our Cuneo, the headquarters of the New Italy.” In his white uniform zip top, his chest swelled with pride. Endorphins always sent him into a patriotic euphoria. Marco was New Italy’s ideal son, a living Michelangelo with broad shoulders and chestnut hair that curled over his noble forehead and his patrician nose. Poster boy for his employer, the Ministry of Longevity and Health.

Then her earpiece hummed on a new note and a new voice, a syrupy sort of voice, almost female, said, “In a few days we’ll be giving you the whole story on your Foreclosure, Citizen Cuneese. There’ll be a great new opportunity for you to serve New

Italy. To get you ready for the next stage of your life, we will be adding a new supplement to your Healthy Citizen nutrition pack—look out for them in your next delivery.”

Then the power-walking songs began again—techno pop hits, making the earpiece buzz like an enraged wasp. Alida shook her head, but she knew that the damn thing was there to stay, unless she chewed her own ear off. Or bought an extractor of government devices on the black market. But to do that you needed money, and to have money you needed a job, and she, a few weeks away from her thirty-third birthday, was still an intern. Which meant she was safe from Foreclosure, right? Not eligible. Anyway, most of the removal devices were sold by undercover officers of I Federali.

“What is it?” Marco had noticed something. Damn. Shouldn’t have shaken her head. Was she frowning? Had he picked up a certain lack of enthusiasm? A good Juvenile can serve New Italy with a positive mental attitude.

“Nothing. I’m fine. Really.”

“Is your earpiece OK?” he insisted, in a professorial tone. “You can upgrade, you know. There’s a new subdermal model. It’s a lot less annoying.” He pulled up his scar and showed it to her, a little bump in his wrist covered with the tattoo of a snake’s fully opened jaws. She jumped backwards, away from him.

“I’m getting updates about Foreclosure, that’s all. Must be a transmission error.” She shrugged her shoulders, then started stretching.

“Of course you are!” Uh-oh. He sounded excited. “You’re going to be 33 soon, aren’t you?” Instantly, he checked the calendar on his health tracker: “Labour month 10, Day 53. I can’t believe I forgot...” He slapped his forehead. “We must celebrate! I’ll apply for a Dining Permit.” He punched something on the health band screen, then smiled, flashing his top-of-the-range orthodontics, polished to perfection at the oral spa every week. They’d been dating for three years. He had yet to remember her birthday

without prompting and she wasn't sure if his suddenly shining eyes and blazing smile were for her happiness or the opportunity to eat fried food, which a Dining Permit would confer on them.

“Is Foreclosure exciting, Marco? They've been telling me I'm not eligible because I'm interning with Il Principe.”

“Don't worry about it. They probably haven't updated your message band, that's all. Unless they've changed the regs, of course. But Foreclosure's great, anyway. You go into the Requalification Programme.” He was using his masterful voice, as if educating her was his mission in life. “Update your technical skill base so you'll be able to get an even better job. It's supposed to be a once-in-a-lifetime experience. Wish I could qualify. Everyone loves it. Silly little pussycat, what are you worrying about? Come on, our legs are getting cold.”

If it was just retraining, what were the Foreclosure Deserters about? But Marco grabbed her hand and dragged her onward, up the mountain track through the pine forest to the next rest stop, where there was a marvellous view of the Good Wall, the ever-changing, kilometre-high hologram screen, which, on that day, was projecting the work of Veronese and the Venetian School. Beyond the Good Wall were the magnetic fields that protected New Italy from immigrants trying to get in from the French side. The Good Wall, with its continuous projection of beautiful images, stopped you from thinking about the incinerated corpses beyond it. Still, the thing always disturbed her when she was up close. All that beauty just a glaze over a pile of horror; that's what people said. They talked about boiled brains and the charred bones but she had never seen them.

The earpiece calmed down once she was running again, sent her a good selection of tracks and an anti-coffee commercial. On her way home, all she could think of was a shot of espresso on her tongue. They could try all they wanted to make her kick

her coffee dependency but as long as she could tap into her mother's stash, that wasn't going to happen.

In her parents' kitchen, the supplement dispenser was centre stage like *bocca della verita'*, the marble mouth of truth sculpted in a church wall in Rome. She keyed in her breakfast order and the syrupy voice came back with the same message. Sure enough, the supplement dispenser issued two new brown capsules, experimental coffee supplements that she loathed. She hesitated, trying to remember her mother's coffee code.

Then, a new message from the Central Employment Office. "Interview request. Code 5, high priority, mandatory. Ministry of the Environment, Cultural Heritage Division, Tito Benito Building, 11am. Thursday, Labour month 10."

What was happening? The Cultural Heritage Division was the employer of her dreams. Her Masters in Social Engineering and Cultural Studies, her doctoral thesis on *Industrial Buildings: New Italy's Cultural Heritage*—they were the perfect qualifications. Maybe she could help programme the Good Wall, or devise remedial leisure activities for Commoners. Or something. She was the definition of delayed gratification. After twenty years of education, was there going to be a reward?

She pulled one of the new capsules apart and looked at the contents, pink and soft, like marrow. Smelling of honey. Sweet. But they always were. Remedial meds tasted best.

Thirty-five interviews last year, thirty-five rejections. Who was she trying to kid? People said these interviews weren't real at all, just a way the Government filled in your time before Foreclosure. What if it were all true? The idea of another disappointment broke over her like a wave. Her health band flashed because her pulse was soaring and her serotonin levels crashing. The supplement dispenser spat out the corrective meds, two more capsules that bounced out of the device and rolled across the

worktop. Alida watched them roll like dice. Instant pain-relief fix. Not taking your meds was the beginning of true freedom. Besides, there were better ways to block out the pain.

She balled her hands into fists. Twenty-six hours before she'd have to be there for another interview charade. Plenty of time to see what her father had in the cellar. She had some nirvana buttons she'd bought off the Commoner girl who had a pitch by the Convenience Gym on the corner. The brandy and the buttons were perfectly fine on their own, but the combination was heavenly. Alida felt her mouth water with the anticipation of bliss.

At work next day her cubicle was waiting for her on the 12th floor of the Gerontocrats' Palace. She glanced at the flock of rainbow-coloured origami paper cranes on her desk. They looked docile, but she knew better. They were little dragons in the making. One day, she would manage to fly them along the Good Wall and capture the whole seasonal design along the border of Provincia Granda. Even beyond, who knew, further than any Juvenile like her had ever been. They were light and undetectable, but she still hadn't figured out how to pilot them effectively. For the moment, she looked for favourable winds, just before the Security Sky pattern changed, and high buildings to launch them from.

The ideal launch pad was next door—the Principe's massive steel and glass office room, at the end of an internal staircase across the hall, which boasted a 360-degree view of Cuneo. And yet, this was the ultimate ivory tower with sealed windows and artificial ventilation.

Behind the Il Principe's chair, against the far horizon, stood Monte Cervino, the jagged pyramid of rock soaring into the blue sky, the white snow on its shoulders

standing out against the dark green for the forest below. Such a peaceful sight, in contrast with the hustle and bustle of the streets. The South Becca face was almost completely vertical, and reflected the copper sun rays of the Security Sky directly at her eye level. The mountain top was crowned with gilded snow. The old alpinists used to call the route from the Italian side the Stairway to Heaven and she could see why.

She looked around the room. Oxygen dispenser, massage mat, document magnifier—Il Principe’s work station was all ready. In the rare moments she was honest with herself, she had to admit it was possible that this powerful man had done her father a favour by asking her to intern for him. But most of the time she liked to believe it was because she was good at what she did. She was going to climb the ladder and make it to the top. She just had to be patient. One day, she’d be in Il Principe’s chair, admiring the views. She’d have new windows put in, though.

A rectangle of light. Pale something, pale blue. The skylight. The skylight above her bed. The Security Sky must be in a new spring pattern. Request Sky design update. Currently rolling out Pattern 44. Tiepolo meets twentieth-century transgender entertainment. Pale blue with glittery bits and something like a tangle of white rope that was meant to be clouds. It wasn’t going to make her Sky Pattern Top Ten. Fade to Foreclosure song. “To everything, la-la-la. There is a season, la-la-la...” How long had that been playing? Time to get up.

Something on the floor. Slippery. Some old 5D constructs, scattering next to the bed. Tricky. Falling. Must be falling towards the desk. The glass-engraved portrait of her with Marco on their first Love Date, February 14, 2047, fell off and broke. The trouble with nirvana buttons was they messed up your sensory circuits. After they

erased your memory. Short-term memory—nothing too serious, but still. All these files everywhere. She must have been looking for her old animated resume before she blacked out.

Resume! Interview! Time not to get Foreclosed, time not to be eligible. Get the files back in their box. The last one in, her BA in History of Arts, shook in her hands like an earthquake and started making an emergency noise. Before she would switch it off, she heard her mother's voice from halfway up the stairs.

“Alida, is everything all right? What's that noise? Why don't you come down and say hello to our guests?”

Because they will just ask me if I'm working yet, since all their children have got jobs; mother will paste on a smile and tell them about Il Principe but nobody will be fooled. Get off my case, will you?

“Sorry, sorry! I've got an interview, I'm sorting out my resume and stuff. Just give me a second.” Old technology, so embarrassing. Who the hell still used hard copies? Employers just viewed your documents on the national database.

The alarm was drilling into her ears. She pushed all buttons on the device—nothing. It must have been damaged. Clunky old thing. But not for throwing away, not yet. There was something about their imperfection, no longer fit-for-purpose status, that was quite appealing. Touching the files, running her fingers on their lumpy surface, made things feel a bit more real. Like she really was a graduate, a Master of Arts, a PhD. She is Dr Cuneese. It made her feel there was substance to her knowledge. It made her feel less like an impostor.

Camilla, her dear mother, was not going to bother coming to her room at that time of morning, when a good Gerontocrat wife had her girlfriends over to show off their new procedures and boast about their successful children and drink a new Himalayan wild tea, which the latest science proved prolonged a female's life by 22%.

None of her mother's friends had children who were unemployed at 33. There was one woman, someone Camilla had been at school with, who had a son who'd gone into Foreclosure, but she'd drifted out of the group and they thought it best not to call her.

Desperate to shut off the alarm on her BA 5D cache, she held it against the wall and punched it. Silence. The cache opened and the hologram projection of university events starting rolling in front of her eyes. And there he was. Otto. Otto campaigning for Student Assembly. Her heart skipped a beat. It really did, the health band showed her pulse flipping up and down. His big frame, one shoulder carried higher than the other, that shadowed look he had. "What's his problem? That boy always looks resentful." Her mother had wrinkled her nose when she showed her the ceremony. Otto was the first Commoner to have ever been elected. The last thirty seconds of his victory speech, when he put into words what every Juvenile wanted out of life. Unique meaning. A sense that they made the world a better place. And there she was, standing next to him when thousands of joyful faces cheered. She looked her old self in the eyes and remembered that passion, that conviction in a better future for young people. What had become of everyone? After university, they had all scattered in the niches and the back alleys of New Italy, everyone for him and herself. She'd been crap at keeping in touch. It was all good fun for the first few years. "Oh, I'm working for my uncle's laboratory." "Oh, software testing. I was part of a doctoral team. My mother knew someone who was hiring." "Oh, you know. I'm going to work for a Senator when I get my Masters. Doing research. My dad put in a word for me." Then they would say, "And you'll finish your PhD soon." Then she got her PhD, and the conversations started to feel a bit sticky. "I'm sure something will come along." "Your father can fix you up, can't he?" "Shouldn't be a problem, with your connections."

Stuck on the internship treadmill. Yes, Daddy could fix me up, but where was the honour in that? She shut off the cache and pushed it under the bed. A stop-gap.

That's what she was. A temporary temp. A comma, a pause, a brief moment in other people's professional lives. The highlight of her day was coming up with ways to make something out of nothing, to report meaningfully on nothingness.

For the attention of His Honour Il Principe, Governor of Cuneo Province: I have great pleasure in confirming the negative data for today's date. Foreclosure Deserters: nil. Casualties reported from the Killing Fields: nil. Suicides: nil, including suicides by Juveniles.

Another quiet day at the office. Another soul-destroying exercise, printing reports, empty sheets of paper, for the highest ranking Gerontocrat to look at, every four hours, every single day, twelve hours a day.

The only good thing about this placement was the paper, one of the Gerontocrat luxuries. The ruling elite was above the regulations imposed on the rest of New Italy. Gerontocrats, unlike the rest of the Citizens, were not a threat to society. "Digital or Die" had been the first rule sanctioned in 2030, when the Gerontocrats took over. New Italy had to be self-sustaining. In the old days, paper was bought in from Scandinavia, but the northern forests were beginning to die out. Twenty years later, nobody knew what to do with paper. They didn't even know how it felt, how it smelt. But not Alida. The best part of her thesis was the case study of the Old Paper Factory, but it was the product itself that she loved. That sweet almond-like smell, the texture of crumpled paper against the skin of her palms, the taste of melted nutty pulp on her tongue. The little cuts. You had to be so careful. Cut quickly, cut where no one would see, inner thigh, arm above the cuff. Keep your eyes open. Don't draw blood. Just feel that hair-thin edge sting your skin.

Interview in a few hours. Interview, job, not eligible for Foreclosure. Time to hit the bathroom, take a shower, scrub your tongue, get rid of the nirvana breath. "A good

Juvenile serves New Italy with a high standard of personal hygiene.” Scrub, wash, moisturise. Repeat.

After the drying cycle, she went to the mirror. Hair back for the morning run, then up for the interview. And there it was. As she pulled her hair back and reached for a band, she saw the shadow at the hairline. Nothing, must be nothing. But there it was, a thin coloured streak at the roots, standing out clearly against her white skin and dark auburn curls. The blue hair.

Her heart sank. She could hear Miranda, her childhood nanny, pottering about in the room next door. If she had more time, she’d ask her to pluck her blue hairs out. This can’t be happening to her. Miranda would know what to do. When things fell apart, she’d fix things, with a smile on her face. Nothing ever made her sad. Growing up, Alida used to watch Miranda doing the chores while singing some kind of old folk song from back home. All of that seemed like a long time ago. Before Foreclosure became real.

You saw Blue Hairs sometimes, the Foreclosure Deserters who had gone on the run from the Feds, trying to hide their shame under ski-hats or swim caps, but the fear in their eyes gave them away. There was a special lesson in school, one of those after-the-exams specials, but you didn’t get your final certificate if you cut it. Blue hair meant a Juvenile was ready for Foreclosure. The colour was created by a DNA modification and programmed to grow in at the age of 33 if a person’s Citizen Record indicated they were not yet employed. They never said what Foreclosure was, though. Just an up-skilling programme. Marco was such a liar, but something about this told her not to challenge him, not to make him suspicious. Still—why did the Blue Hairs run away?

It was a mistake. Another mistake. I am not eligible. I work for Il Principe. Under the skylight, the blue roots were now quite visible. Tick tock, get a proper job.

Not a day for an up-do then. She ruffled her curls, shot in some volumiser, pulled a few extra strands around her face.

It can't possibly be true. Il Principe needs me. His last corneal regeneration didn't take. He's half blind and he needs an intern with infinite patience, great digital skills and the ability to handle paper. That's me. I have a job. My Foreclosure status is suspended. They have to reverse the blue hair. Mental note: check-in with the Citizen Bureau. Make sure they have up-to-date data. Even a perfect society like New Italy sometimes messed things up.

"Signorina, can I come in?" a knock on the door followed and Miranda's accented voice lingered in the air.

A ping.

"Give me a second, just came out of the shower." She almost tripped over herself, scrambling to grab her health band from where she left it on the bed. "I'll see you tonight," she added absent-mindedly. The screen lit up: "Hi there. Been a while. Can we meet up?"

She took a deep breath when she saw Otto's id pop up on the screen. Otto.

"Why not? It hasn't been long at all, has it? Twelve years, give or take some change?"

"Fifteen."

"So we are friends?"

"Sure."

"Sure means not sure."

Not this crap again. He hadn't changed. She swiped in a sighing face and wrote, "Meeting. Time and place?"

"As soon as. Anywhere not surveyed."

She replied, “the store room at the Old Paper Factory, half an hour” and swiped “Send,” followed with, “No drones up there. Watch out on the way up tho.” Meeting Otto will calm me down. Distract me before the interview. Really.

“Guess you know it well. Read your thesis.” That was all his reply.

A familiar gnaw in her gut, anticipation mixed with anxiety. To get into the Paper Factory—any factory—you had to climb. After the last insurgency, when barbarians had broken into the old Chocolate plant, all the factories had been sealed off, the power withdrawn and the staircases booby-trapped with the same technology as the Killing Fields. They released surveillance drones inside, but they only covered the ground floor. To get into the building, you had to climb the exterior to reach the upper levels. She’d got pretty good at it when she was researching her thesis, but then she had a permit.

The kit was still under the bed. She reached down, took out a coil of rope and measured it. Alida, you’re not accurate enough. Imperfection means death, whipped the voice in her head. If your ascent is x , your lead rope must be $2.5x$ and your guide rope $4x$. Her cheeks were on fire. She could feel red spots surfacing on her skin like ink seeping through blotting paper. Glad to be alone, deep breath. She exhaled, pushed her hair off her face and wiped her sweaty brow with the back of her hand.

The short rope got demoted to the back of a closet that was already overflowing with junk she’d rescued during her doctorate, equipment left by the careless climbers who’d gone in before her, a belay joiners and camming kit, even a pair of hardly-worn shoes, stuff she’d been keeping in case she needed it one day.

Alida took out a longer rope from under the bed and started again, feeling her heart was beating faster.

She closed her eyes. Otto’s dark stare lingered behind her eye lids. She would have to hurry to meet him before the curfew.

Her health band picked up her accelerating heart beat and was telling her it was time to run anyway. She pulled up a pair of sparkling white compression leggings and zipped up the water-repellent top with a hoodie. She hated the Juvenile sport uniform, but today, especially with her blue roots starting to show, she wanted to keep a low profile and stick to the Clothing Code. The white sweat-band would hide the roots. Standing out was never a good idea in the New Italy where I Federali patrolled the streets to bring law enforcement to the people. Juveniles, all properly kitted in their white uniforms, ran to and from their daily duties, so many slender ghosts against the grey industrial buildings.

As she stuffed the ropes and the climbing kit into her backpack she could hear her mother and her friends shrieking with laughter in the salon. She heard the chink of tea cups, the click of their jewellery as she slipped outside her teenage bedroom and left her parents' fifth-floor penthouse in the service elevator.

Chapter 2

Down on the street, she saw that the Security Sky was preparing a cleansing shower. It was early in the Labour month so the rain was still just a drizzle, but it still felt like daggers on her skin, so she pulled her hoodie over her forehead and pressed on towards the park. The smell of bleach was pungent in her nostrils. The Cleaning Brigades had just swept the streets. The programmed shower was going to freshen the air, but in the meanwhile there was no choice but to inhale lungfuls of acrid smoke.

The Old Paper Factory was in a park, once intended for the workers' vehicles but now designated for growing hardwood. It was on the far side of the Civico Quarter, across the *Ponte dei Suicidi*. Her route was easy, through the tree-lined grid of broad boulevards, between the Mussolini-era villas and the even older historic buildings, prized property in the Old Italy and impossible-to-turn-down rewards for the middle-agers, like her parents. The original Civico generation, parents of the Juveniles, children of the Gerontocrats, had been bought off by prime housing. They had accepted the regime of New Italy in exchange for real estate—the only thing that mattered to them, a property-hoarding miserly bunch obsessed with ownership. Her father, Antonio, always said that new rules come and go, but five bedroom penthouses overlooking the Berlusconi Square with a view of the Alps are forever. He always left it at that and it always made her feel not smart and left out, as if she should have grasped the meaning of things left unsaid.

After her loop around the piazza, which was teeming with Civicos out walking towards the Convenience gyms for their mid-day sessions, she felt the fog of brandy and nirvana buttons lifting. If only she could get that permanent job in Cultural Heritage. The Good Wall was New Italy's most magnificent achievement. Yes, true, some people called it the art of death because the force fields beyond kept the country safe by killing

all intruders. A unique scientific process, based on the principle of the retro microwave. But the Wall celebrated all the finest Italian achievements, refining and uplifting every citizen who could see it. As the Government slogan went, death was necessary for life. Two sides of the same coin. In cultural heritage, there was a beginning and end to everything. The end of an era was the beginning of another one. No such thing as a final ending.

Thinking of death made her sad. But everyone knew that the Good Wall was the only protection against the barbarians, the only way to save Italy and protect future new Italian generations. And that future had a price. That's what she overheard Antonio say, over and over, while growing up. And he was always right, if perhaps a bit blunt. Certainly not to everyone's taste. Their country had fewer and fewer jobs for young people. That's when the Elders gave him a chance to put his ideas in practice. And her father came up with a brilliant plan: the Population Maintenance Strategy that allocated jobs to people and people to jobs. Priority number one: keep out the barbarians. Compassion was a good instinct, he said, but in a civilised country instincts had to be socialised. You wanted a job, you had worked hard to be qualified for a job, more than qualified, even. Why would you give your only chance away to a foreigner? Of course no one cared about thankless jobs like Miranda's. Foreigners could have those jobs. She used to spend all school breaks defending her father in front of her peers. He wanted the best for them, why couldn't they understand that? Her arms were always bruised from all the pushing and shoving. A little price to pay, she thought, for showing her loyalty to her family. Then her family moved to Berlusconi square and her circle of friends changed. Suddenly, there were no more protests, everyone seemed to get it.

She was leaving the Civico quarter now, running along the Embankment of the river, snaking through the city and leading past the Great Gerontocrats' Palace where her father worked. Every time she saw this building, a mass of glass and steel, an

architect's psychotic dream, towering over the town of Cuneo and reflecting the light of the sky into every corner, she felt dwarfed by the power of the state. She was a little piece in a big puzzle and she was afraid. Was she being randomly tracked by the Feds? She took a shortcut towards the Ring, the green belt that separated the countryside mansions of the Gerontocrats from the city, and varied her speed, making turns to mask her intentions. Not that it was illegal to use the green belt temporarily, for exercise purposes, for instance. Keeping one's body properly oxygenated was a Juvenile's duty, along with getting qualifications. But running in a straight line might have looked like a potentially menacing act towards the Gerontocrat Quarter, and could attract attention.

Beyond the Gerontocrats' Quarter was the Juvenile Quarter. It was a stark contrast between the two, but she wasn't going to linger on it now. She covered her nose with her balaclava to reduce the powerful stench of the fermented garbage that had been dumped at Juvenile Quarter street corners. She ran on faster, feeling anxious in the narrow streets that were lined with state dormitories for Commoners, repurposed office buildings decorated with blistered corporate logos and sagging plastic fascia. However bad she felt about living with her parents, things could be much worse. And there were so many cameras here. But all young people were supposed to run everywhere, so she was just blending into the white-uniformed rhythmic crowd.

Il *Ponte dei Suicidi*, the Suicides' Bridge connected the Juvenile Quarter and the park that bled now into the Industrial Area. Nature taking over what man had claimed before. The cycle of life. Death and Life, two sides of the same coin. That was not the bridge's official name, of course. Built in the late classical period, its official name was Ponte Ferrero. The original Ferrero had been a chocolate maker, so some people now thought the name was distasteful, although not as unfortunate as the fact that the antique architecture was a gift to citizens who wanted to end their lives illegally. But

Gerontocrats liked classical architecture and were permitted chocolate, and so, officially, the bridge kept its old name.

It was only half-way across the Bridge that she thought about Otto. What the hell was going on with him? She stopped by the 11th pillar, the one that Juveniles used to throw themselves off into the turgid green waters of the river. So many feet had trembled on the parapet, so many hands grasped the column one last time, that the paint had worn off, leaving bare metal gleaming in the spring light.

All this time that he had been out of touch, she often thought that he must have ended his life. The State didn't like Commoners with leadership potential. This would have been the traditional exit point. A chill ran over her. She looked down, into the dark, swirling waters and her memories followed: Otto passing her the answers to the Classical Greek paper in exams. Otto as a student, leaning on the wall by the refectory door, pretending he wasn't waiting for her. Then, when they were out of camera range, taking her hand as they walked home from campus, until they got to the border of the Historic Centre where he'd punched her shoulder and said, "Take care of yourself, Princess." Otto when he was Zeus in the drama club play, lighting up the open-air stage in the park every time he jumped into the scene, brushing off the junior girls afterwards as if they were a swarm of puppies, then looking at her with his charcoal dark eyes. Otto on the last day they walked home together, when he hesitated, didn't punch, didn't drop her hand, but pulled her close to him, touched her cheek, nearly kissed her. Or had she imagined it? A little flutter of love, a butterfly, that was all. Had she even felt it? She had her DLP now. She had Marco—unofficial relationships were prohibited. The last time she saw Otto he was running away, back into the Inner Ring zone, and disappeared between the rat-grey buildings. The hospital called the next day. When he had been brought to Emergency, the only number in his phone was hers.

Otto as she'd last seen him, his long dark hair on the hospital pillow, a drip in his arm. "I'm not going to be here for much longer, Alida. Don't hang around. You've got your Civico destiny to follow. Best forget me. Go away. Leave me alone."

"But..." Strange. A pain like a hot knife drawn across her heart. "Juveniles can serve New Italy by managing their emotional states," but suddenly obeying Government mantras was such a difficult thing to do. And then, through the glass door, she saw the dark mass of two Federali, and the nurse beside them, who opened the door and said, "The officers need to talk to him now, Signorina. You'll have to go."

Two days later, Otto's face was on the news screens every hour. "A renegade Juvenile has attempted to take his own life. Remember Juveniles, you are New Italy's most precious resource. It is a crime to deprive the Government of its resources." Then, no more news. If he'd been captured, the story would have been on the evening Crime Triumph Hour. So at least he wasn't in jail. She rubbed her face with her pocket sweat-wicking towel.

Otto was the same age as her, nearly 33. His birthday was on Saint George's day, a week before hers. But Saint George's day was tomorrow. She had to keep moving.

She had never tried to do anything properly illegal before. After all, the Gerontocrats had eyes and ears everywhere. That was what everyone thought, what with the cameras, the patrols, the health tracking straps. Her heart rate was still in the yellow zone. She could feel it even without looking at her health band, so she had to move. She crossed the remaining stretch of the park and headed towards the abandoned silhouette of the Old Paper Factory.

Otto hadn't given her a meeting point, so she focused on stretching her muscles while she looked around. The outside cameras, she knew, were all at the entrance, but they were wide-focus. So, they might pick up on movement over a good distance. One

could not be careful enough. Taking in the smell of leaves and the still, humid air of the mid-day, she leaned against a tree, the bark rough against her palms and brought her face closer, as if to breathe the oxygen from the sap through her nostrils. She looked up at the transitioning sky. Bright and cloudy at the same time. It was warm for April. They must be running maintenance on their Sky patterns; this was unhealthy.

Fifteen years without news from the guy. Apart from that shadow of resentment that her mother found so disturbing, his face was hazy in her memory. Would she even recognise him? Tall with a way of bending down at one side to listen to lesser mortals. Long limbs, he used to throw his student bag on top of the lockers. Never the sporty or outdoorsy type though, she wondered how he'd survived out there all these years. Pale, milk-white skin that never saw the sun. Something attractive and something fuck-you at the same time, like a cat.

She didn't know where to begin looking for him. She knew enough about the surveillance of abandoned sites to avoid the inside of the building. She could see the camera drones and light beams sweeping constantly, a precaution against squatters. The last thing she wanted was to be caught trespassing.

Climbing the façade of the building was always more acceptable than being caught inside, even if by a small margin. If the Feds came, maybe tell them she was doing a Strength Challenge. She needed to get to a high point to look for Otto, but also to launch one trial paper crane. The wind was going to pick up just before curfew, at the change of the Sky Patterns, the best time in months for origami bird launching.

The factory stood tall and silent, surrounded by the trees. It was constructed of red bricks, with round, sturdy pillars at the entrance, an unusual feature for Brutalist architecture, but that playful experimentation was only decorating the facade. Someone got away with it while others were not looking, she smiled. Everything else about the

building was typical: stern-looking, sharp-angled windows, balconies and floors.

Nothing pretty about it. Functional, reliable. In-your-face solid.

An easy, predictable ascent for an experienced climber, Alida presumed. But she wasn't nearly as good as her father. And the open-rock climbing she had been brought up on was very different. But where to start? Perhaps a tree would be easiest, and not likely to be booby-trapped. Looking up, she saw the thinning crown of a maple. And on the far side of the trunk, the cameras wouldn't see her. She took a deep breath and started climbing, aiming for the crown, where the branches met the outer wall of the building.

When she reached the last safe point of her climb, she stopped and looked down. She must have been five metres above ground. If she fell, she would break at least a few bones, or worse, break her neck and die on the spot or never walk again. There was something exhilarating about potential danger. Her heart quickened. She took some chalk powder out of her hip pouch and thoroughly scrubbed it into her palms to create grip.

Come on, Alida, you can do it. She made the sign of the cross inside her closed mouth, with her tongue, something she hadn't done since she was a child. Survive something like this then be arrested for Overly Religious Behaviour, that would be ironic.

From her crouching position, she sprung like a squirrel, aiming for a narrow balcony on the second floor. The handrail felt cold and rusty under her hands. She fell inside the rail, heard a snap and felt a sharp pain across her face.

Oh bugger. She pushed herself up to sit on the small concrete ledge that was filthy with pigeon droppings. Bugger, bugger. Something sticky on her lips. Nose bleeding from the impact. With her back to the wall, she fumbled for her sweat towel to

wipe off the blood, then pushed her head band down over her face so the elastic applied enough pressure to stop the bleeding.

This was supposed to be the easy part. Above the balcony were downpipes, cornices, projecting window frames. She started climbing, her fingers feeling for nooks only after her toes had found reliable holds. Push up through your toes. Keep your centre of gravity steady.

Heart racing, she got to the top floor, where a window had been broken. Shards of broken glass everywhere. She slid into a wide room, full of discarded bales of paper. This must have been a storage or a drying room. Or both. Old rust and rotten pulp mixed into an acrid smell that pricked her nostrils, despite the blood in her nose.

The 360-degree view from the top was breath-taking. Cuneo seemed like a collection of chess pieces on a hand-carved board, encrusted with jewels shimmering in the Security Sky and surrounded by icing-capped mountains. Above all, Monte Cervino towered. It was the only landscape element that didn't seem like a toy. The jewel in the crown of the Alps, protected by Nature itself. The impossible pass.

“You haven't changed.” Otto's voice resonated through the room.

Alida saw him from the corner of her eye, standing in the shadows by the staircase, next to a paper stack. She breathed deeply and turned around.

“And hello to you, too.”

He had one hand on the rail. Worn-out, hi-tech clothes—no odour and dirt repellent—hung from his shoulders. He'd lost weight. His climbing shoes, old school, old tech. A military holdall rested on his broad shoulders, one with him. Was he carrying his house around, like a nomad? He looked weather-worn.

“We're okay, that type of drone loses power above ground level.” She followed his gaze as he briefly swept the room with his eyes. Quick glances around the room, taking in the debris that rustled in the moving air from the broken window. He folded

his arms across his chest and stepped towards her. They both stopped, one step short of holding each other.

At this height and distance from the city, there were not a lot of sounds. No whistles from the zip-rail cars, no earpiece coverage. Even her health band, she realised, had lost connection. Just the wind in the tree tops a few floors below and the odd cracking noises of a decaying building. Specks of dust danced in the ray of light coming through the middle floor-to-ceiling window, demarcating the line that separated them.

Thinner and older. Fine wrinkles around his eyes. The muscles around his mouth flinched, but his lips remained sealed. His hair, streaked with silver. And blue.

“Blue,” she muttered, her gaze fixed on his roots.

“Happy birthday in advance,” he shrugged. “You ok?” he touched his nose, then pointed to hers.

A hot wave washed over her face. She removed her headband from her face. It was stained with dried blood, so she shook it loosely then pulled it carefully over her roots with the bloodied red part hidden at her nape.

“Listen, I can’t be here long. I can’t be sure I haven’t been tracked and I don’t want to mess up your life as well. But I need your help.” A dense layer of stubble covered his jaw. There was something very immediate about his request that sent her pulse racing. A fist tightened inside her chest.

“I...” she thought how insignificant she was. “Tell me what I can do? What happened to you? Where have you been?” She had nothing to offer. Did he need food? Probably not, if he had survived under the radar for fifteen years. Shelter? He seemed to know his way around. He squinted his eyes, as the sunshine reached his face, and moved backwards into the shadow.

“I’ve been on the run for a long time. They don’t know where I am unless I show up on a camera, and I’ve learned to fog the image,” he said, holding out an old

school wave jammer, just enough for her to know that it was a black market hand-made piece, then pocketing it swiftly. “Don’t forget I escaped before they introduced the tracking systems.” He pointed to her earpiece.

She instinctively clamped her hand over her ear, her eyes opened wide.

“But tomorrow is my birthday, and a Foreclosure mandate will be issued in absentia,” he spoke softly but fast. Her tongue was tied. “Based on my birth records,” he added. “I will be the most wanted Juvenile in the New Italy, and I’m guessing the Feds will throw everything they’ve got into finding me, together with my fellow untraceable runaways.”

She felt the air between them stand still. Her skin prickled.

“Congratulations,” she whispered, nodding towards him. She felt an inkling of joy. Maybe they could go into the Requalification programme together. He may have been on the run, but he certainly couldn’t hide, could he? If she could just convince him to stay, it would be just like the before. Just like the old days, studying together, making plans to conquer the world together. But then it dawned on her he may not want that, after such a long time outside the system. It may not be easy for him.

“Of course I’ll help you,” she said. “They’ve screwed up my records; they’re sending me Foreclosure alerts. We can go into the Requalification programme together. It will be as if you’ve never been outside the system.”

He moved away from her, towards the large window that let the Sky Pattern sun in, then turned around. Copper light, dancing on the surface of the glass shards scattered across the room was reflected up his face, like a disco globe.

“So you’ve bought the propaganda, too?” he sighed. “Is that what you think Foreclosure is? A requalification programme?”

She moved closer to him, leaned against a pillar and hunched her shoulders.

“That’s what Marco says.”

“Marco? Oh, yeah, your DLP. Rich kid, good job? You think he’ll be your meal ticket, I suppose?” he sneered, shaking his head. “When’s the wedding?”

She could tell he wasn’t waiting for an answer. “Enough, Otto. I didn’t come here to be insulted. He’s not my meal ticket. I have a job and I want to be useful to our society.” We believe in the New Italy.” Why was it so hard to look him straight in the eyes?

“About that job. You’re an intern, aren’t you? With Il Principe in the Ministry for Employment and Prosperity?”

“How do you know that?” She blinked.

“We can hack the central database. I know what you do, and I know you see all the Foreclosure notices before Il Principe sees them,” he was leaning down towards her face, his breath hot on her skin. The files are beyond a firewall and since you use paper, it’s impossible to hack. He held out his arms and gripped her shoulders softly. “Don’t you ever wonder why there are so many Foreclosure Deserters? Why Juveniles take their own lives?”

She looked down on his hands, veins pulsating under the skin. Thoughts were flapping around in her head but none of them settled. None made sense.

“I know you can’t stop the process, but you can delay it. Some records can drop out of the system for a few days.” His hands squeezed her shoulders. She swivelled and released herself from his grip. Her head was dizzy.

“Are you asking me what I think you are?” She felt confused, disappointed. He was asking her to break the law. Friends never ask friends such things, she thought, shaking her head. At the bottom of her heart, she’d hoped he just wanted to see her again.

“Alida, please. I’m just asking you to hide my file until I’m safely out of the country.”

“You can’t leave the country. Nobody can. Our borders are impenetrable.” She put her hands over her ears. Now he was asking her to be his accomplice. He was going to escape, too. No, no, no. She could feel tears pricking her eyes.

“Please. You’re Antonio Cuneese’s daughter. The High Gerontocrat’s little princess. No one will suspect you. And if they do, your father is going to get you off the hook.”

“I can’t, Otto. You don’t understand...I can’t lose people’s files. They’re all tracked through the system.”

He suddenly seemed to collapse, sliding down against the wall, until his elbows were resting on his knees, his head hanging down, but still a ball of rage, helpless and aggressive, all at the same time, as he had been in the hospital.

“No, you don’t understand.” He shook his head, then looked up at her. She could see him struggling not to play on her feelings, but at the same time feeling powerless. Was this the Otto she’d admired so much all these years?

“I won’t be Foreclosed. They don’t do it for Commoners anyway. They don’t think we’ve got any capacity for qualification.”

“But if you won’t be Foreclosed, why are you worried?”

“Because I’ll be killed, Alida. I’m not perfect. I’m not healthy. I’ve got a genetic disorder. It was diagnosed when I was fifteen. That’s why I tried suicide the first time.”

Outside the sky was pulsing, from blue to violet, to dusk red, clouds like rivers of blood through a dark valley. They were definitely doing maintenance.

“But...”

“But I look so healthy. Well, I did look healthy, then. It’s in remission. It might be in remission most of my life. If it becomes active, it’ll cause neurological damage, muscle—did you ever hear of multiple sclerosis?”

“That’s not something that happens to people anymore.”

“In theory, yes, it died out after the War, when they started screening people. But a few of us Commoners still carry the defective gene. Apparently. So you see, they won't Foreclose me. I'll be euthanised. Straight away.”

Another chill around her heart, this time deeper, that leaden feeling of your worst fears coming true. “What do you mean, straight away?”

He reached out, took hold of her hand, pulled her down to sit beside him. “Foreclosure is not a requalification programme, Alida. Marco lied. Don't blame him, it's his job to lie, that's what the Ministry of Longevity and Health does. That's what all the government departments do.”

“So what is it?”

“You could say it's an eternal life programme, but not our lives. Their lives. The Gerontocrats. Don't you ever wonder where they get all the tissues for those procedures, all the blood and the muscle and the bone and the brain cells? From people who've been foreclosed. It's a harvesting programme. Of course, you get looked after for a few months, kept in peak physical condition while they assess your potential. You might get out if you qualify for population generation.”

“Having a baby? Is that allowed?”

“In a few rare cases, yes. But mostly you're just put on optimum nutrition for a few weeks and then...” He drew his forefinger across his throat. “Humanely, of course. Most of them never know. They tell you you're getting a neural upgrade or something. But for me – well, with my condition I'm not worth anything more to New Italy.”

Her heart fluttered like a bird trying to escape her rib cage. He was still holding her hand and he squeezed it, as if a moment of human warmth could make the message more acceptable. Was it true? Was he the one who was lying? Anyway, she was not eligible. Not eligible.

“What are you going to do, then?” She took her hand away, gently. It seemed the polite thing to do.

“There is a way out. Over the mountain. People like me have been using it for a few years. It’s not safe. But you have a higher chance of survival than waiting for Foreclosure. All I want is a couple of days before the Feds know I’m a Foreclosure Deserter. I was planning to make a start now.”

“So by the time the light goes, you’ll be at the pass,” she calculated out loud. “Is the pass still open, then?” Monte Cervino, casting its shadow over them as always.

“I can’t use the pass. There’s a checkpoint, and they’re already searching for me as Juvenile deserter. That’s a lower Security alert code, though. The route means you have to climb via the Southern Becca face.”

Her insides churned. The Becca was notoriously difficult, attempted many times but conquered only once. Her father used to talk about it with awe in his voice. If nothing else, he had respect for the mountain.

“You’re going to die,” she whispered, feeling tears starting.

“Well, maybe.” That frank, direct look—it was the first time she’d seen it. “Before you ask, I’d rather choose when and how to die than to have someone chop me up just because they can. You see, that is the choice.” He stood up straight and gently moved away from her. “I’ll be fine. I’m sorry. I thought I’d ask you, I thought it was worth a shot. You...we...” No, he wasn’t going to say it. But he had admitted it, they were connected. What a girl she was. “I’ve got to make a move. Good to see you, Princess,” he said, then looked away.

No tears. I will not cry. Her eyes welled up despite her will.

The wind was picking up. There was howling throughout the empty building below them. Her first thought was that it was the perfect timing to launch the origami birds. She felt ashamed. She shivered, despite the mild temperature. She wished she had

paid attention to the hourly forecast. There was usually a sudden drop in temperature before curfew if one paid attention, and she could tell this was it. Her peripheral circulation was very weak and she had to be careful. She zipped up her vest. They couldn't stay there much longer. She glanced one last time out the window, towards il *Ponte dei Suicidi*.

A whistle from a zip rail was getting louder and louder, as if in on a chase. Then, she saw it. A Federali car, bright neon light beaming in all directions. Otto joined her at the window, his breathing jagged in her ear.

"Time to go, Princess." He deftly ran back to a rear window where she saw his rope anchored, clipped on his harness, made a gesture with his free arm that was something between a gallant salute and a despairing wave, then jumped. She heard the rope hiss. Then nothing.

Don't go to the window, don't tell them he was here. He would be running across the park to the scrub on the far side, then make his way through the undergrowth to the mountains. She realized she was holding her breath. Take his rope up, take it with you, get out of here. Get away from the window.

She could see the *Ponte dei Suicidi*. A man came running across it. Fast. Was he the one the Feds were after? With the light behind him, she couldn't see his face, but his long hair floated in the wind like a flag, a blue one. A fully blown Blue Hair, a Foreclosure Deserter. Wearing grey overalls, probably a Commoner, off his shift with the Cleaning Brigades.

At the end of the bridge the zip rail car appeared, howled to a halt and snapped open like a broken bone. By instinct, even before she saw the weapons, she threw herself back behind the window frame, out of the line of fire. The black figures spilled out of the car and took up firing positions, aiming for the Blue Hair. She gasped,

shrinking back against the wall, hoping they would be intent on their target and not look towards the factory.

The dark suit in command lowered his weapon and raised his gaze.

She dropped to the floor. Her heart was pounding out of her chest. From the bridge, some voices, but she couldn't hear what they were shouting. She rocked back and forth, then dragged herself to the window and raised one eye above the window sill.

The dark suit was gone. Now she could see two more running men, small dark shadows, following fast behind the Blue Hair. Their dark suits seemed to blend with the metal pillars of the Bridge, the bark of trees in the distance, the grey of the buildings against the horizon, as if they were urban chameleons, one entity with the surroundings. The Blue Hair was on the bridge now, and, as if he had found untapped energy within himself, running even faster. At Pillar 11, he swerved, jumped on the parapet and threw himself over the rail, head first into the water. One of the Feds raised a weapon, aimed over the parapet and loosed a dome of net over the water. They had him. The second officer ran back, and together they lifted the Blue Hair out of the water.

She exhaled forcefully, as if the net was tightening around her limbs. The Feds had him on the ground now, giving him a kicking. She felt herself wince at every blow.

“Arms above your head. Put your hands where I can see them,” thundered a man's voice behind her.

She jumped as if she'd touched an electric fence and turned around as she raised her arms. Another dark suit, but not a Fed commander. He crept her out. The lack of expression on his face. His pasty skin and thick eye-liner, his corpse-like stiffness.

Too old to be Federali. Unusually tall, of late middle age from the fine lines on his face but not yet a Gerontocrat. Dressed in black silk like them, his low Chinese-style collar exposing a scar on the right side of his neck. She tried not to stare at it.

“Let me see your wrist,” the man commanded.

“I am Alida Cuneese” she volunteered immediately, holding out her arm.

Sometimes a family name had its uses.

He had a retinal ID reader. He scanned her tattoo with his eyes, and she saw the beam blink once. She checked out. She let out a small sigh of relief.

The man raised an eyebrow. “Related to Dottore Antonio Cuneese, are we?”

She nodded.

“I’m Commander Friske, the head of the Vinadio Federali unit. Are you alone up here, Citizen Cuneese? This place is dangerous. We’ve had intelligence there’s a fugitive in this area.

She swallowed, but her parched throat could not get any relief.

“What are you doing up here?” he came closer, as she raised to her feet. She held his hard gaze, his eyes slightly narrowed.

“I was preparing for an interview, Sir,” she said, stressing the “Sir” like a good soldier, looking straight ahead, barely allowing herself to breathe. “Tomorrow I have an interview at the Ministry of the Environment. I did a case study of this building for my thesis, so I came over to remind myself, make sure my knowledge was up to date. In case I got questions on it.”

“A while ago, was it, your thesis?” *You are one of those worthless Juveniles who still hasn’t got a job, aren’t you?* But he didn’t dare say that, not to Antonio Cuneese’s daughter. Was her hair still covered? He was looking at his device, checking out what she said. Half-truth always better than a lie. She saw his face relax, just a fraction, as the info came back. “You got a permit, then?”

“I got a permit during my study period.”

“That’s expired. You should have reapplied.” He was walking around her.

“Open up your bag, please.”

Fingers, stop shaking. She pulled the bag open and shook out the ropes, the D-rings, the chalk container—nothing to see there. Otto’s rope was old and frayed, but so was one of hers. All standard issue. He took the objects out and stared at them, one by one. Her heart stopped as he looked closely at Otto’s rope.

The black figures of two Feds appeared from the stairwell making noise. Friske dropped her stuff back into the backpack and pushed it towards her. She breathed out as softly as she could. Up close, the dark shadows were enormous men, towering over her. They must have suspended the killing beams.

“We got one of them, Sir.”

Friske was looking at the window from where Otto had left.

“Only one? Didn’t the system say there were two of them?”

The hairs on Alida’s neck stood up, her scalp tingling as the Feds approached them.

“And, we’ve got ourselves a Civico princess without a permit. Who would have thought?” Friske muttered under his breath, amused. “This young lady is the daughter of Dottore Antonio Cuneese.” His men backed away as if the Cuneese name was a whip and they had just been lashed with it.

A Juvenile’s duty is to uphold the law, repeated Alida to herself. A Juvenile must inform the authorities if they witness any law-breaking. I should tell them about Otto. It’s my duty. But her lips felt as if they’d been welded together.

She coughed, to release the tightness in her throat.

“I apologise, Sir. I didn’t mean to break the law, Sir. I was just anxious about my interview.”

Friske turned to look at her, and she could see he was not satisfied, even if her story had checked out.

“How long have you been here? How did you get into the building? Is she on the video?”

This was to the officers, one of whom started to link into Mainframe Security and punch in the building code with his blunt fingers.

“I climbed, Sir. Using a tree. Didn’t want to cause an unnecessary security alert and besides the old buildings are weaponised nowadays and they never tell you. I thought it was safest. I got here late this morning.”

“See anybody? Anything you noticed?”

“Nobody, Sir. I don’t know how long that window’s been broken. There’s some weather damage on the old paper, that’s all.”

“Nothing on the video after she crossed the bridge,” reported the officer.

“Should we take her with us, Sir?” The other man came closer to her, one hand held out menacingly towards her.

Friske turned back to the window, scrutinising the horizon, past the tree tops behind the Factory, as if Otto was suddenly going to appear on the mountain road.

After a long pause that made Alida shrink inside, he said, “Why not?” She exhaled, as the man’s hand retreated away from her. Friske came close to her and whispered into her ear “We can do the Dottore a favour. Free ride in a Federali vehicle.” He signalled to the men, “Key up a curfew-breaking ticket for Citizen Cuneese here.”

“But Sir,” she attempted, then thinking of Otto, she bit her lip. “Curfew is in half an hour,” she raised an eyebrow, seeking confirmation.

“Well, I can interview you for an hour, and you’d effectively break curfew. So let’s assume we did and you are in violation of the Curfew Act. We have to put something in the system. This is all on record now.”

“But if I’ve got a Curfew ticket, they’ll cancel my interview.”

“Are you asking us to sympathise?”

“No, Sir. Not at all. Sympathy does not serve New Italy. But it is a fact, my interview. I’m just remembering a fact.”

The good girl act was winning. She could see him classifying her stupid and harmless. “Can we update her permit?” The look on his face was a mixture of certainly and cunning. This was to the officer holding the device, who keyed in more characters, then looked up and nodded.

“Do that, then. We can be generous today.” He picked up her wrist again and his retinal scanner beeped three times as he recorded the permit. Alida focused on stopping her hand from shaking, keeping her breathing regular, keeping her health band quiet.

“People like working for generous people. Don’t forget to mention us to your father.” Did he wink at her? It felt as if her blood had curdled in her veins.

Walking steadily beside the Feds, she then went down the stairs and into the ground floor lobby, full of dust and shadows. They marched across, fending off the buzzing drones, and left through the massive old doors, walked down the overgrown driveway and got into the zip car waiting outside the main gates.

She slowly started to hear the noises of the park around her, wind through the trees and the rhythmic whisper of the waves of the river hitting the bank—the distant sounds of the main Avenue and the nearby zip rail hub. Life was going on as if nothing had happened. And Otto was going to get over Monte Cervino and escape.

In the car, she noticed that her health band was suggesting relaxation sessions. “Hatha yoga at Berlusconi Square, 30 minutes. Focused meditation, South Embankment Park, 6 pm to 7 pm.” She must be tense. She was feeling angry.

Friske leaned around from the seat in front to talk to her and saw the chill-out programme generating options. “Our apologies, Citizen. We’ve got our job to do, but we didn’t mean to stress you. Good luck for tomorrow, eh?”

“Of course. I understand. But can you leave me at the South Embankment gym?”

“No problem,” he said, and in a few more minutes the car halted by the gym entrance. She walked home from there, entering her building under the curious eyes of the Commoner in the doorman’s uniform who everyone knew was a spy, who would have loved to report that she’d been dropped off by a bunch of Feds—which would have been on her interview record tomorrow.

She went past him. The Commoner girl with the sports gear pitch that doubled as nirvana buttons sales point for the connoisseurs looked happy to see her. The girl’s eyes dilated as Alida began to fumble through her pockets.

“Cheers, no dope today, got some stashed.” She offered an awkward smile. “I’m in the market for something else.”

“What kind of something?”

“Intelligence gear. Black market.”

“Plenty of that about – what exactly are you after?”

“A drone. Rogue, of course. I need to programme it.”

“Sure,” she slurred through her chewing. “Probs shit loads of money though.”

“Cool. I’ll get on it, see what’s out there. Catch you later.”

In the gym, as she downward dogged and sun saluted, the memories of the afternoon made her insides turn. The Blue Hair on the run, his capture. Otto on the run. Herself, the Civico Princess, saved by her name. Her name could save Otto. Was it true, what he said about Foreclosure? Why was he such a fool? Why didn’t he trust New Italy like everyone else? Anger again, tense again, her health band flashing again. Otto. Maybe he was the liar. He’d always been healthy; this genetic defect story could be another lie. Too late now; he’d chosen his destiny. A flash vision of a body at the bottom of the rock face, limbs at crazy angles. Such a risk. So brave to try it. She could

help. Even as she tried to reject the idea, her mind was thinking through the Foreclosure procedure, thinking of ways to hold out his records for a couple of days. Yes, there was a way. The question was, could she gather the courage to do it?

Chapter 3

The next day, Alida joined the wave of Juveniles on their run-commute to work. Streets cleanly swept. Air crisp. Sky pattern—dull as anything.

Empty stares. Runners going past her, in the opposite direction, with their eyes fixed on some target, weaving in and out of office buildings. No eye contact was good. It meant she didn't have to worry about what they might read on her face. A muscle in her left calf kept pulsing. Please don't tear, please not now; I can't go into an interview limping. Her health band was flashing, "reduce pace, reduce pace." She wasn't late. No reason not to comply for the final sprint towards the Great Gerontocrats' Palace, where she was planning to work the morning before leaving early for the interview.

She was two streets away from the Palace when her earpiece went live again. The syrupy voice stopped her in her tracks. "Interview rescheduled. Attention, Citizen Alida Cuneese, interview rescheduled. Report immediately to the Cultural Heritage Division, Tito Benito Building. 11 am. I repeat, 11 am, Labour month 15, Working day 46."

The syrupy voice melted into a countdown timer: two hours to go till your interview. The Tito Building was on the other side of the Historical Centre. Quick mental check: 20 minutes to get there, on a good day of running. She had enough time to do the first round of printing for the day and inform Il Principe she was going for an interview. At the Ministry of the Environment, Cultural Heritage Division. This was her big break; she could feel it. He would be impressed, surely. Deep down, she wished he were disappointed. All he had to do was offer her a proper job. How long did she have to prove herself? Either way, this should work out in her favour.

On the one hand, she was thankful for the extra nutrition shakes she had that morning, that seemed to give her the edge for this unexpected sprint. On the other, her entire stomach was tied up in a knot, and she could have done with fewer things to

digest. This was it. The last interview before her birthday. Was that Foreclosure warning really a mistake? She should have prepared better. Although, if she were honest, she couldn't focus on studying after meeting Otto. His face was seared in her mind. But first, she told herself, ace this interview. Get the job. Just get it.

She reminded him about the interview and Il Principe gave her his restrained smile. Smiling must be hard when you were having a facial procedure every year. He took the first reports of the day from her hand, skimmed through them and set them aside on his desk. He wished her luck and told her he was going to see her father later. She nodded and attempted a reciprocal smile, but her cheeks felt tense and unwilling to obey her commands.

She heard him speaking as if in slow motion, her brain distorting his voice in a low-pitched, drawn-out series of sounds. Hovering, unsure of what to do, she bit hard on her lower lip to prevent the wrong words from blurring out. As she handed him the papers before she left, her palm closed like a claw, a spasm she couldn't undo. She held out her hand, balled into a fist, a bit longer than she should have. Finally, her fingers released the papers. Time to go.

The Tito Benito building was a late-classical monument that filled a whole block with the Cultural Heritage Division looming large at the end of the Corso Francia. She wasn't prepared for the bustle she found inside. The mass of white uniforms going to and fro, like driftwood on the waves, made her feel dizzy. Her health band showed she had a few minutes to spare.

Large screens above head displayed numbers. Interviewees' numbers. Room numbers. Floor numbers. The constant flashing, colour coded Tokyo-by-night signals made her eyes water. Blink fast. She attempted to adjust her sight to the visual cacophony, without much success.

The lobby was ceiling-to-floor marble, three stories' high, divided by two Art Deco pillars the size of thousand-year-old sequoia trees that you saw on the Good Wall during a nature sequence. She leaned against the first pillar by the entrance, trying to steady the swirl around her. She touched her cheeks, then her forehead with the back of her hand. It felt ablaze, her hands cold as ice. Suddenly, squeaking into action, her earpiece triumphantly announced the five-minute countdown had started. Alida slapped herself over her right ear: "Stop it, you annoying, tone-deaf piece of..."

"Move along, Citizen, move along." A female voice, embodied in an androgynous Civico shape, was parting the masses like water and brought her back to reality. Alida nodded in the direction of the Person Whose Job Was To Move Along Juveniles and pressed her earpiece as if important information was coming through. She could tell that the closer to zero the countdown got, the more excited the syrupy voice sounded, as if she was about to be told she had won some kind of award. Two minutes to go. Every sound felt like a needle piercing her eardrum.

The earpiece exploded in a ding-dong sound and started vibrating, heating up her earlobes and bringing her back into her body. "Ready or not, interview time. Ready or not, interview time."

"Oh do shut up," Alida snapped. It wasn't going to be fun, so why pretend? This was like going to war, wasn't it? She picked up her colour-coded directions to the interview room from the ceiling-hanging screens. The lift-reading system beeped as she ran her wrist over it. Before she could blink twice, the doors closed like a coffin trap, inches from her nose. She felt oxygen had just been sucked out of her lungs; her ears popped. The other interviewees, standing next to her in the airless space around her were all impeccable in their fresh-smelling uniforms. Keep looking ahead, Alida. Be perfect. Imperfection means death.

She pictured herself climbing. Breathe in. Imagine air from above snow, the purest, the cleanest. A sense of peace came over her, the same feeling she had when she was alone on a mountain. Breathe out. Imagine yourself acing the interview.

On the top floor of the building there was only one room. Everyone else had left the elevator on previous floors where the waiting rooms were. So she was the first candidate. Good. The best positions are first and last. The doors slid open with precision and shut as soon as she exited, almost trapping one a strand of her hair. The light was dim and made her narrow her eyes. As she looked sideways to her right, she noticed a bright beam shining from the end of the corridor, where a glass door had been left ajar.

“You are late twenty-five seconds late.” The voice in her earpiece intoned this as she entered the room. Her heart responded, her pulse accelerated... “You will start the interview at minus 30 points.”

“But I moved as soon as the screen showed the way to go. Why minus 30 points?” She challenged her surroundings out loud. Was this one of those interviews with inbuilt attitude assessment? Her heart pounded faster. She couldn’t afford to waste one precious point. The room was lined with wall-to-wall mirrors that reflected her image endlessly. That old trick.

“The interview has started. Anything you say from now on is considered part of the interview. Why 30 points, would you like to record that as part of your interview?” A sharp voice from the middle of the room. A hologram on top of a silicone table popped up at her eye level. A Civico woman in a standard grey suit scanned her from top to toe with her metallic eyes. Goosebumps prickled her forearms.

She shifted the weight of her body from one leg to another and raised her open palm towards the Civico woman.

“Oh God, no. No, thank you. I was surprised, that’s all. Please, can you erase?” She stared at the glass table, looking for a menu of options. The projector generating the

hologram was in the ceiling. There was no chair, so that she had no choice but to stand in front of the image. Not much light in the room, and the projection wasn't bright, but she could make out the virtual sketch of the middle-aged woman, with tiny round brimmed glasses perched on the tip of her nose.

A sharp voice rejected her attempt, "Erasure isn't possible. Request denied, request denied."

She could see the recording button flash at the top of the screen.

The voice resumed "Minus 20 points. The interviewee mentioned an imaginary being known as God."

She pressed her lips close together. They tasted salty. No more blunders. She could see the interview slip away from her.

"Interview number Z48. Recruiting for the Clerk 222 position. Citizen Cuneese Alida reporting twenty-five seconds late for the interview, then invoking an imaginary supernatural power. Starting interview at minus fifty points. Anything you say, Citizen Cuneese, is part of the interview. You can skip questions only once. You can choose another interviewer at any point in the process. Would you like to proceed?"

Interviews had a certain protocol, a coded back-and-forth interaction that she was only too familiar with after so many failed attempts. She anticipated the sequence and the type of questions the way pre-Change people had become used to safety instructions on planes and tuned them out. Her mother used to say that the old-time flight attendants could have recited a patriotic song in Kiswahili and no one would have noticed. She made an effort to stay in the moment and focus. Don't be too confident. Don't be aggressive. Don't try to make an emotional connection.

"Yes, please." She touched the button with the option "Change interviewer" when the menu of options appeared in front of her, as soon as the sharp voice finished reciting the instructions.

The next hologram pop up was a female character in her late twenties. Alida struck the “Change interviewer” before the young woman even opened her mouth. If there was anything worse than being interviewed, it was being interviewed by one’s younger self.

The last option, judging by the dimmed out “Change interviewer” button, was another Civico woman, but more attractive, looking like proper Piemontese stock with bobbed white hair and what looked like an ultra-fine cashmere sweater. Someone who would look at home at her mum’s coffee table.

“Yes, I would like to proceed,” she sighed. There were no more choices anyway. Fate had chosen for her.

“Good. My name is Karen, Inquisitor of Juvenile Employment Affairs and Suicide Prevention, your interviewer for the day.”

Alida nodded. The taste of the nutrition shakes lingered in her throat. She swallowed, but her mouth stayed stale.

“First, do you have any questions about the interview process?”

“Yes.” Was that sounding too eager?

Karen’s raised eyebrow should have alerted her that pretend questions were not actually meant to be answered.

“I’m sorry. Actually nothing. Just curious why my interview was rescheduled, that’s all. But no need to answer, that’s fine.” Shut up, shut up. Just answer the damn questions.

After a deep breath, she added quickly, “I’m here now, that’s all that matters, isn’t it? A bit late, but I thought I might just explain my slight delay. Shouldn’t hold that against me, should you?”

“Right.” The woman was looked over her personal data displayer, frowning.

Alida gulped. Everything that happened in her life from the day she was born, up until the unfortunate God reference on day of the interview, was in there, in that plastic square with electronic synapses. Was she going to ask why she went to the Paper Factory?

The interviewer pinged something on her displayer then quickly raised her deep-set dark eyes.

“Ready?” She darted a piercing look at Alida and didn’t wait for a reply. “Welcome to the Government’s Cultural Heritage Division. We are the proud promoters of the New Italy in Cuneo, La Provincia Granda.”

Actually, it was easier being interviewed by a hologram. She could tolerate a programmed interviewer, incapable of emotional reactions to her answers, which had usually ranged, in real humans, from scorn to pity. Besides, she always thought a human being could officially drop dead of boredom after reading the same text hundreds of times. So you couldn’t really blame them.

“Clerk 222 is a newly created position. The full title is Industrial Building Inspector.” The woman waved across the screen and the visual highlights of the job description popped out, seeming as if they were hanging in the air in front of her.

Taking in the details scrolling in front of her eyes made her heart sink. She had dreamed of programming the Wall with beautiful, forgotten sites from across the province, or maybe of some new programme rehabilitating abandoned buildings and rendering them useful to the community. But this job seemed likely to put her in rubber boots and overalls for the rest of the foreseeable future. But then, it wasn’t as if she could have great expectations. It was her first job, after all. What did she expect? At this point, all she could think about was getting the job, full stop.

“The Central Database pulled up your resume because your education is compatible with the job description.”

Alida felt a flurry of emotions knot in her stomach. She reminded herself to breathe deeply. She kept her arms straight, loose by her hips and puffed her chest forward.

“Masters in Social Engineering and Cultural Studies, PhD in *Industrial Buildings: New Italy’s Cultural Heritage*, very good,” the woman swiped backwards and forward through her data on the display in front of her.

Then, she put the device aside and said, “As far as your Model Citizen score is concerned, you’ve got a long series of internships and no employment roles. This would be the first such role you would have.” She paused. “I’m not going to lie, there are thousands of people like you lined up for this job.” So tell me something I don’t know. Just keep smiling. She felt her nose twitch with the effort.

“Tell me, what makes you uniquely qualified for this job?” The woman’s eyes brushed across the screen. Her face was expressionless. She stared somewhere behind Alida’s head, at her multiplied mirrored reflections.

“I have grown up in Cuneo,” she cleared her throat and straightened her back. “I know this province like the back of my hand, all its sites, all their history.” She was blushing, and it felt like sunburn in her cheeks from the inside out. “As you have noted, I studied Art History,” she continued, “I minored in industrial archaeology. I can tell you all you want to know about the beginning, the middle and the end of the industrial era in our part of the world. I can tell you where every single industrial building is in La Provincia Granda and its history.”

The woman nodded, encouraging her to continue.

“I am passionate about serving New Italy. I feel our cultural heritage is what makes us unique in the world; it is the great strength of our civilisation and the reason we have survived as a country when so many have disappeared. I believe we should preserve and promote our outstanding artefacts.” She felt proud, almost as proud as

Marco on his patriotic high. There was no other word she could think of to describe the expanding pressure she felt within her chest. In retrospect, his enthusiasm didn't seem so over the top anymore. I can be part of something bigger than myself, she thought. I can finally practice what I learned all those years ago.

“Where do you see yourself in ten years?” The elegant vision seemed to be smiling. That was good, right?

She used to answer “In your place” but that reply didn't work that well on holograms. If she had to be realistic, she'd say married with children and hating her brain-dead existence, but she kept her interviewee-for-a-proper-job persona together. “I'll put my credentials in the hands of the Central Database and the Gerontocrat Council. I am confident that my gifts and qualifications will be put to good use,” she said, slightly bowing her head and lowering her eyes. As hollow as a hologram herself.

The woman nodded, almost imperceptibly.

“Your employment score is impressive: 251 points. That's at least 200 interviews since graduation. You are committed, obviously.” The woman keyed in codes and pulled up quick calculations from the depths of the displayer. Alida tried to read them. Although these numbers were on her mind all the time, it was a different matter to see them and feel their weight during an interview. Her throat felt even drier now.

“Why do you think you haven't found a job yet?”

Cringe. Cough. If she were truthful, she would have said “Exactly. Why haven't I found a job yet?” But this was all a dance, a warm-up routine before they floored you with the real questions, she knew it.

“I assumed it was because the Central Database found other equally qualified young people with an edge that perhaps I have lacked. I am aware that my specialisms are somewhat niche.” Use the good girl voice. Compliant, patient, humble.

The woman nodded. “So why should we choose you?” The words darted off her tongue, stressing the why.

Time to regurgitate the usual “I’m passionate” and “I will be a good asset,” but then, what was this question really about?

“Why indeed? You have half my university colleagues on staff. So it’s not my unique knowledge. It must be something I’ve learned in the past ten years while looking for a job. That’s my competitive edge, isn’t it?” All those years of begging for a chance had given her a thick skin. A no is a no is a maybe is a yes. It dawned on her that looking for a job had been a job in itself and she could market that as part of her expertise. One that didn’t pop up on the Central Database.

“An interesting idea. You’ve been a good soldier, kept trying, despite the setbacks. Grit is good. We like grit.” The woman set the displayer aside and stared Alida straight in the eyes.

Or maybe it was because she was desperate and they knew it.

“I will now move into the attitude analysis. Here’s a situation for you: You’re part of the national climbing team on an expedition to summit the Everest on behalf of New Italy. You encounter someone in distress, 300 metres from the summit. What do you do? Stop and help or press towards the summit?”

She pictured icy cold air cutting her face like a million needles. Blinding white snow. A dash of colour curled up on the path, between her and the top. Her instinct said stop and help, her mind said press forward. She hesitated. The woman picked up the displayer and swiftly tapped the screen. Not a good sign, she could tell. Do they record your facial reactions?

Can’t afford to let my guard down now. Frown. Stern people look more professional.

“As my data shows I achieved a Distinction in Climbing in my athletic education, so the mountain environment is familiar to me and I would be confident I could assess the risks. I would stop to check up on the person, radio in the situation to base camp and then press forward.” Not true, of course. She would have helped the person down the mountain. No one deserved to die alone. What was another athletic challenge next to saving a life? “I might feel sympathy, of course. But I am aware that sympathy is not a social emotion. Every Citizen is responsible for their choices. It’s my duty to promote New Italy. At any cost.”

“Right,” the woman made further notes. Her face was blank, impenetrable. “Next situation. A building is on fire. Your husband and your father are inside. They are both wounded and need support to come out. You can only save one, but it’s not certain that if you try to do it, you won’t die yourself. What do you do? If you decide to help, who do you help first and why?”

Well, she had to give it to them. It wasn’t the usual boring interview loaded with the what are your weaknesses and strengths charade. Improvise, and if you don’t get the job, you won’t feel like a total failure.

She was going to stick with her selfless projection of herself. It helped to believe that she could be a better person, given the circumstances. Like a self-fulfilling prophecy. But in this case, that lofty image of herself as the saviour wasn’t likely to help her case. Best to stick with the “Government Knows Best” mantra.

“I wouldn’t go after anyone. If the building is still on fire, it would kill all of us. I am fortunate that my DLP is a man of courage and strength, and I could not do a better job of rescuing my father than him. My most helpful action would be to call the Fire Federali because they are the real heroes and I trust they will save my loved ones. Then, I would attempt to identify the source of the fire and try to extinguish it.”

“You would risk the lives of your loved ones to put New Italy first?”

“We...I need to put the country above our individual interests.”

Can they tell when you're lying? Her health band was dark. The earpiece was buzzing faintly as it recorded the interview. Give me this job, I need this job. I need to spend my days crammed in a workspace with a few hundred other Juveniles waiting for the next pay credit. Her skin felt tight. Maybe splash the last dime on nirvana buttons on the way home. Forget sucking up to a hologram who got to decide whether she could be admitted among the rarefied air breathed in by people in employment. She nodded to reinforce her point. “I think that would be the right course to take.”

“I really appreciate your honesty,” said the woman. “So I'm going to be honest with you.”

Here comes the bullshit, she thought bracing herself. She almost wanted to shut down her earpiece. The next day, its pestiferous voice was going to go over her interview in excruciating detail, explaining to her where she had gone wrong. If she got this job, her ordeal would be over. It would be worth it, just to keep the earpiece from lording it over her, hour after hour, for the next twenty-four hours.

“We're looking for an industrial buildings tester, which sounds like a lonely, overalls and rubber boots type of job, but you would be part of a team working hard to keep us all safe.”

“Naturally,” Alida mirrored the woman's affirmative head movements. “It's an important role. I would be happy to contribute. The good of the many must prevail of self-interest.”

“You have the qualifications for the cultural side of the job, mapping where everything is, the history, how it got there. Nice points. But you don't have the Sci-Tech qualifications we need.”

“I am a spatial learner. Industrial buildings are physical. Maps and scale models and well...climbing, my oxygenation sport of choice, help me profoundly understand

these constructions and their past and future use.” What else, what else? “And I would be more than happy to extend my skill base on the scientific side.”

“I like that you’re both internally and externally motivated to do this job. Although your learning style may be a bit...how should I put it...unconventional, I am nearly persuaded you may be the right candidate for this job.”

Her heart throttling in her chest, she leaned forward, her knuckles white, pressing against the screen.

After a pause, the woman laid down the mission of the job. “Clerk 222 will need to survey all industrial buildings and find out their weaknesses...Essentially, you’ll need to find out the most effective way to destroy them. Is that something you would be prepared to do?”

The hologram’s words shot electricity through her spine. The one who loves the most will be the one to inflict the most destruction. She felt a dull pain throughout her body then elation, lifting her spirits. She gulped then nodded, without a word, then remembered the recording and say, “Yes. Yes. I can do that.”

They didn’t really need a particular skill here, did they? Just someone with a proper pedigree and nothing to lose.

The hologram disappeared. The recording was over. Another voice said, “Interview concluded. Thank you for your attendance. You may leave now.” It suddenly became very chilly inside the room. She turned on her heels and made for the door, opened and gasped. Behind it, in flesh and blood, stood the woman.

“Oh my God, you’re real.” Not God, not again. Damn, damn.

“Indeed I am. And so, I can tell, is your interest in this job.” Karen pushed her back inside and closed the door behind them. “So I need to explain now what the implications of this role are. My industrial building tester will assess all the abandoned

buildings in the Cuneo province and make them safe from antisocial elements. You have heard of the Bloody Brigades?”

Words froze in her parched throat. She noticed the “my”. One glance at Karen, told her she owned her staff. Their lives, their thoughts, their futures.

“Bloody...what? That sounds like Civil Defence to me, more than Heritage, isn't it?” Otto's face came to her, blurry, a remote puzzle. His back, as he climbed out of the Paper Factory window and out of her life.

“The so-called Bloody Brigades are a small group of terrorists. Their goal is simply to destroy New Italy. Anarchists. The Federali have excellent intelligence, and we expect to destroy the last cells soon. The last remaining Brigades are always on the run. Small-scale urban terrorism is all they can manage, but they keep us busy. They've been using old factories lately. You see, rather than focusing on creating jobs for Juveniles, we have to waste resources on the wrong things.”

The woman's determinedly pleasant smile seemed frozen. Steady now. Return the expression. She could see how the elaborate ecosystem of industrial buildings would provide a refuge for terrorists. Otto's face came into focus. She clenched her jaw to stop her teeth from clattering. It felt as if the blood drained from her face.

“These old industrial buildings are safe spaces for the Brigades. We need to neutralise their safe havens and destroy them till the last one. Find the rats' nest, kill the rats.” Only that it wasn't going to be “we.” It was going to be her.

“So there are elements, as you say, of civil defence in this role. Are you having second thoughts?”

“No...no, indeed. I had no idea there was such a danger. I would be proud to serve New Italy,” she replied, locking her ankles and straightening her back. Be a good soldier. That's what good soldiers do, take orders and carry them out to the letter, don't they?

“Good. I’m happy to say that we can offer you this role. I will inform Il Principe directly, and he will release you to report to work tomorrow. For the first few weeks, the operation will be simple. Scan, Map, Alert. You won’t be seeing any dying people as you come down Everest, I can promise you that.”

“Will I...ever have to kill anyone?” she blurted.

The woman ignored her, and repeated, “We can offer you this role.”

She’d done it. She’d got the job. What to say—thank you? Damn, she’d never rehearsed this. Feeling dizzy, have to shut my eyes. When she opened them again, Karen was gone and the room voice was inviting her to leave.

She breathed in and out for the first time when she was out in the street. The Security Sky beamed. Pillars of grey clouds, with red streaks from the zip rail cars reflecting upwards. The air was dry, so dry that she had to gasp like a fish out of water.

Then, the black shapes of some Feds coming around the corner of the building, running. For her.

She felt a grip squeeze her shoulders, and her hands were tied swiftly and securely at her back. She didn’t resist. Mistake, it was a mistake.

“Citizen Cuneese, you have to come with us.” A rasping voice, the scar-faced man. “We have information that confirms you have concealed the location of a Deserter...” He almost spat the words close to her face.

“Your information is wrong,” she said, heaving in as much breath as her lungs could hold. “I want to talk to my father.” And she stared at him until he looked away. Damn Otto. Damn him. They’d caught him and he’d grassed her up. This was not going to happen. After 201 interviews, she had won a job and nobody was going to take that away. Not now, not ever.

Chapter 4

Earpiece down, just a hissing noise piercing her drum. Then something like a thunderclap pounded her ears and pain shot through her limbs, waking up her senses. She came to suddenly, as if she had saved herself from drowning or from a recurrent nightmare.

She crunched forward in an attempt to exert control over her body, but thick, strong straps held her back, tightened around her forehead, chest, wrists and ankles. As she pushed to test them, they cut into her skin, like merciless plastic, and she winced. Her palms touched the vertical surface she was attached to. It was smooth and cold, like a metal morgue table set upright. Had she come back from the dead? Her eyes felt dry and the endless whiteness of the walls made her continuously blink.

Where was she? Her brain was mush. Without the ability to check her health strap or change the earpiece channel, she was lost. No way to check her location or the time.

Gaping mouth, starving for air and no oxygen to be had. She felt the urgent need to look at herself in the mirror, to confirm her bodily existence. This is what being dead must feel like. Surely you were conscious enough to realise you were dead. Cold, aching, numb limbs. A feeling of irreversible loss.

She was sure she was awake though, alive. The soreness of the IV drips pricking her arms and legs skin was familiar. She tugged at her limbs, and pain shot through the back of her neck. She flared her nostrils, but could not pick up any scent. The room was sterile.

It all reminded her, though on a different scale, of the marathon session of implants she and the other Juveniles received during The Change. It had taken the nurse on duty an eternity to get a vein in her arm and when she did, it would break easily so

she had to start again. Although she could not see the bruises, she could feel them, imagine the large tender patches like purple blots on her white skin.

Her earpiece kicked in suddenly, dispensing her favourite technojazz piece, her own medley arrangement. Her favourite song, *Nessun Dorma*, was beeping, ready to be played at her voice command. Judging by how heavy her head felt, she was pilled up. In addition to the usual post-high symptoms, dizziness and blurry vision, she had overly techno-stimulated nerve endings.

Despite a throbbing headache, as far as she could tell she wasn't physically hurt. What a relief. There was no telling though what the Federali had done to her mind.

She tried to focus on one single point in front of her, as if she was about to climb a building for the first time. The walls seemed freshly whitewashed, no wear-and-tear cracks, no cobwebs, no discolouration. There were no smells and no specific sounds. Nothing to hold onto. That feeling of defeat, as if she was in front of a mountain wall as smooth as a sheet of paper, no nooks and crannies to use as support for restless fingers and toes. She needed a starting point and her eyes, despite intense efforts, couldn't find it.

If this was an interrogation room, she was done for. The Italian Federali were the best in the world—that's what the Juveniles had been told since the Gerontocrats took over. Secrets were things people could have before Digital or Die. Since The Change, there was no word for "secret." What do you call something that used to exist that had become obsolete? Useless memories?

The Foreclosure song was a dim memory. She tried to call it to her mind. "To everything, there is a season. La, la, la." Was it her birthday yet? Otto's face was nothing more than a random image on a blank canvas. She knew him, knew his name. They were friends, she remembered vaguely. And then something happened, but what? She felt her own mind was a puzzle board that someone had just torn up piece by piece

then put back together somewhere outside of her body, leaving behind an empty skull. She struggled with the void. A million thoughts wanted to occupy the void. She tried to direct them, like a traffic cop. What thoughts to let in, what thoughts to keep out?

A dull noise emerged from behind the wall in front of her, as if the walls were shifting like tectonic plates.

She squinted, trying to make out shapes and shadows approaching her. “For everything, there is a season, la la la.” Suddenly her earpiece blasted out, making her heart jump.

“Not now, you mindless toy,” Alida shook her head and swallowed hard, hopeful the movement would make the noise stop, but the Foreclosure song picked up the pace. She ordered the volume down until the noise stabilised into an annoying hum.

What does total silence feel like? Bliss. For the past fifteen years, her ears had been constantly stimulated: government messages, background music, loudspeaker announcements, gadget voice instructions, subliminal conditioning. No time to hear her own voice. No time to hear herself think. She opened her mouth to release pressure in her inner ear and let out a heartfelt yawn that sent ripples across her face. The sound waves ended in prickles at the back of her neck. Hairs raised on her forearms. Bloody noise.

From the corner of her eye, she could see the wall slide open. Before she could blink, the sound of a remote siren poured in from the outside: “Please evacuate the building. East Wing Brigade Bomb threat. Please evacuate...” Then, the door disappeared, folded within the wall, and so did the sound.

The outline of black-clad woman stood at a distance. She might hold the answer to the puzzle. Curious, Alida turned her head towards her. A pint-sized woman with Asian features and slick white hair tucked in a bun stood in front of her, as stiff as a

statue. On scrutiny, it was a hologram. But these interrogators were as tough as they come.

Heart in mouth and stomach in knots, Alida's eyes opened wide, and her lips parted slightly. Is she a friend or a foe?

“Alida Cuneese?”

Ice-cold voice. Not encouraging. A chill ran through her battered body. She nodded slightly, tilting her head forward and sending fierce pain through her temples. Her head was thick with drugs. She let out a groan.

“You have been under chemical supervision for thirty-six hours. I am here to inform you that you are granted one visit to see your father,” the woman proceeded to release the straps. Her scent, a mix of ivy and vanilla, was intoxicating. Alida felt her stomach heave. Oxygen flowed through her veins once more, and she felt her cheeks explode in a powerful blush. Her chest was fighting back a dry cough. She swallowed as she rubbed her wrists and bent to encourage blood flow from her ankles upwards towards her heart.

Released to see her father, this sounded like good and bad news at the same time. She wondered why they were letting her go. Was it because they had not obtained anything from her and she was free? Or she did say things and her father held the key to her fate?

“Who are you?” she attempted to lock eyes with the woman, who was measuring her up and down. She tried to move her feet and loosen up a bit, but her legs felt like two stumps that had grown roots into the marble floor.

“You'll feel better in a few minutes. Just move your feet as fast as you can.” Was that concern in her voice? Strange, such a non-hologram emotion. Judging by the metallic after-tone in the woman's voice, she was a top-line robot. They must programme them now with more human features. She had to be careful.

Focus, go on, it's an order. Her mind was a pot of jelly. Sweet, gooey jelly. She could see her hands, reaching out in front of her, as if they were attached to a different body. She wobbled off the bed, holding on to the disconnected tubes hanging down from the ceiling. Slimy and cold, they felt like a web of snakes. A sense of danger rose in her gut. She tied them in a knot, pulled down on them. They bounced upwards, all the way to the ceiling. The tubes disappeared behind a trap door as if they had never existed.

Before she could breathe out, Alida encountered the woman's narrowly slit eyes and her exhalation froze in her throat.

"I am the Chief Chemo-Psychologist with the Federali," she said without moving, her flat voice projected from somewhere in her head. The woman spoke with conviction, her eyes the colour of the sea on a cold winter day. A shivering wave swept over Alida. She wrapped her arms around herself, gently slapping her upper arms and firmly stomping her feet.

This is how the prey must feel when a predator approaches. Alida raised her eyes but couldn't hold the woman's penetrating gaze. A jolt of electricity shot down her spine. She had nowhere to hide, nowhere to run. She tossed and turned the words friend or foe in her head and she couldn't find one element, one sign that would reassure her that this woman was not going to hurt her.

"What happened to me?" Would an answer matter, after all? She had no recollection whatsoever of what had happened to her, no matter how much she pushed herself. Whatever the woman said, was going to be the truth. The last image on her retina was the Federali uniforms and the entrance of the Cultural Heritage Division as the Federali zip car pulled away from the curb. Anything between then and now was a blank canvas for the woman to paint her one-sided version of the truth on. Her muscles

tensed, waiting for a blow. Had she confessed? What had she told them? She felt drained, as if her marrow had been sucked out of her body. Not a good sign.

“We checked your connection to the Bloody Brigades,” the woman shrugged. Alida swallowed hard. Then, she stood aside, letting two Federali come in. Camouflage uniforms, classic uniform, except the shades were larger, like ski goggles covering half their faces.

“And?” Alida asked, struggling to keep her voice steady. Clammy hands. Must keep calm. A strand of hair blew lightly across her face, as the air in the room was forcefully displaced by the entrance of the Federali. She thought of the wings of her origami paper crane flapping in the wind. Freedom. She yearned for it.

“We are satisfied with your cooperation. Greetings to your father,” the woman added, as she handed her over to two Federali men and then left the room without another word.

A stone had more feeling. An iceberg more warmth. They’re letting me go. A sigh of relief. Expel cortisol. That must surely be a good sign. Unless they haven’t been able to extract everything they wanted and they needed more time. Whatever their intent, she had to see her father. Papa knows best, she thought. She’d just tell him the truth, that she didn’t have any connection with the Bloody Brigades and that she was still his little girl. He would know what to do. She felt relieved that there was someone in her world who had the answers. Thinking was exhausting. Making choices paralysing. As much as she wanted to be recognised as an adult, sometimes recoiling to being a child for whom adults take responsibility made her feel safe.

She dragged her still-numb limbs down the stairs to the lobby. The breathing of the Federali escorting her was searing on the back of her neck. Once out, she looked at the Sky. Pattern 59, geometrical blue and blue green with dashes of yellow. Thankfully, there would be rain soon. She felt the first drops and tasted them on the tip of her

tongue. Acrid. At the very end of the street, the Good Wall projected de Chirico's light and shadow early metaphysical paintings. How appropriate that his dreamlike style was supposed to paint that which cannot be seen. Just open your eyes, Alida. Take a deep breath. For someone who had just come back from the dead, she thought she should have missed her parents or Marco. She didn't. She had missed oxygen. She had missed running. Raining. The way she knew the time of day just by looking at the Security Sky or the Good Wall. Others saw art as an oppressor.

The Federali shoved their fists into her ribs and pushed her into the sea of running Juveniles outside the building. She realised they were outside the Museo Egizio, in Museum Square. She didn't have time to process why she had been held by the Federali there. Indistinct shouting criss-crossed the air, like buzzing insects. She could make out a few sentences as she picked up the pace into a very brisk walk. A waft of air carried smells of burned wood and flesh. A cloud of dust was rising from behind the Museum, a few streets away, towards the Grand Station, the centre of the zip-rail web. It was a very French architectural affair that made her annoyed with the Cultural Division. With all the Italian talent in-house, they had to go copy the French. A sign of disrespect for Italian values, clearly.

"The Brigades struck again," shouted a Juvenile woman with her white uniform covered in blood. She held out a hand like a claw. Alida ran past her, eyes fixed ahead. She could smell the acrid scent of fresh blood though. The woman's eyes. Wide, raw with fear. Following her around, no matter how much faster she ran.

"Hide now," others spat at her, as they ran in opposite direction. The Federali kept pushing her forward. She ran against the tide, towards the location of the incident. The air got thicker and thicker with smoke.

She blocked the noise out. Juveniles running by had awkward smiles pasted on their faces. Or sneers—she couldn't be sure. How could these even be smiles? No one

could find these things amusing, surely. Unless of course they were sympathisers. Juveniles on the fringe of society who found what the Brigades did inspiring. The Bloody Brigades were damaging the fabric of society, clearly. Why would anyone join them? Otto's face popped in her mind. Did he have something to do with the Bloody Brigades? Did he really believe that was the solution? She had so many questions for him and he was gone again. The way the paper crane had probably wilted in the palm of his clammy hand as he walked away.

Her breathing was jagged, her pace irregular; she felt out of shape after her time in the Federali detention. She decided to catch up on the news, so she tuned in her earpiece to the Government channel and turned it up. Individualised safety instructions blasted through the headphones, on loop. Then, a calm, non-syrupy voice followed with a personal message. "Alida, everything is under control. Go home and stay there until further notice."

Every fibre in her body reacted to the Follow Orders message, the programmed response. She felt an overpowering desire to swivel on her heels and run home. Like iron shavings attracted to a magnet, she felt the urge to obey instructions. It was the first time she had ever opposed the Juvenile script to follow orders. She shot a glance behind her, at the Federali's unreadable faces, waving her hands, pointing to her headphones, then she dug her heels in the ground and stopped abruptly. The two Federali didn't miss a beat, lifted her up by her arms and pushed her forwards. Brutes. Their hands felt like claws, her muscles wrung out of blood. They dragged her, effortlessly, as if she were made of *papier mâché*. She crumpled in their arms. Feeling torn by opposing internal forces, equally powerful in her head. Obey the Federali. Obey the Gerontocrats. Obey the Federali. Obey the Gerontocrats. A Juvenile's work was never done. Then, a tiny little voice inside her head said, "The interest of the country is above one individual's own interest."

The smell of sweat, emanating from the Federali's armpits, was pungent. Strangely, it was the only sign she had detected that they might be human. She shouted at them, "Let me down, Federali order overwriting Gerontocrats' order, let me down," trying to twist her body out of their grip. And suddenly they dropped her.

She had clarity. One order prevailed. The Federali's order to go see her father sounded louder and louder and louder until it was the only order in her earpiece. It had successfully over-ridden the Gerontocrats' Survival order. She wasn't sure why. Maybe two equal orders could not coexist in the system and the system chose one random order for her to execute. She stood there, in shock. If this was possible, what other Gerontocrats' orders could she overwrite? The Clothing Code? The Hygiene Imperative? Foreclosure? She didn't need to say anything to the Federali. It's as if they understood instinctively she was tuned in to their order. She started running again, the Federali right behind her. To her right, Berlusconi Square. She veered into the first street lined up with elegant *Portici*, taking care to give the two guards ample notice. The last stretch towards the Gerontocrats' Palace felt like she was sprinting the last metres of a marathon.

She made it inside the brightly lit waiting room outside her father's office, on the 29th floor, and there was Marcia, the assistant, the gatekeeper. Marcia, the American in Italy. Marcia who had arrived in Cuneo on an Eat Pray Love self-discovery mission and stayed to run her father's life. Marcia blocked the entrance to her father's office with her towering body in power pose. Not even Pluto guarded the Gates of Hell with so much gusto. She looked like an ebony statue among the precious sustainable teak furniture collected by Antonio on his business trips in South Asia. Her lips were pursed into a silent tut-tut, her back straight, her eyes like searing coals.

Alida moved forward, leaving the two Federali by the lift. News scrolled on the info wall to the right, where Marcia's work station was. More footage of the explosion

near the Grand Station. Fire, Federali, terrorist attack, under control. They had set up a conveyor belt to carry wounded Juveniles to rescue heli-cars. On her left, the view of Cuneo stretched towards the mountains. Green, white, cerulean blue, stretching from the Good Wall to the Sky. The horizon seemed endless.

But everyone has weaknesses. That's what the raised eyebrow was all about. Marcia had been, in Alida's eyes, as incorruptible as a Federali, until the Dining Permit incident. When proper food was abolished, right after the Change, and rationed enhanced nutrition was dispensed based on individualised nutrition plans to everyone's house, Marcia had a melt-down. She decided that she couldn't live on nutrition capsules, and she had thrown such a tantrum that Antonio had to bend some rules to get his peace back. Her father could not function without Marcia. He had invoked her "foreignness" as a reason why certain rules should not apply to her.

It was then that Alida knew she could negotiate with the American. Cunning people have something interesting about them: they know how to get what they want. The raised eye-brow was another way of saying "I know you know I know you know," but also "I don't care."

The door to her father's office was slightly ajar. Alida picked up Marcia's body scent, one step away from her, as she tried to peek in and see what kind of mood the old man was in.

"Good morning, my American sunshine. I am accompanied this morning. I have permission for this visit. Allow me to introduce you to..." Alida turned around and opened her chest up, her right arm extended towards the Federali, scoping possible escape routes from the corner of her left eye. She darted past Marcia as fast as she could. Her limbs had residual numbness from earlier in the day. Darn it, the American had good instincts. Alida's Adam's apple met Marcia's elbow. Not pleasant. Gasping for air, Alida doubled down, her hands wrapped around her neck.

“Nice try, my Italian pumpkin,” Marcia opened her arms, bouncing her off, her grey batwing robe blocking Alida’s view. Alida fell backwards, almost losing her foothold. It hurt to swallow or speak. She could try raising her voice, but no voice wanted to form in her throat. Perhaps her father would hear her and come looking for her. The Federali were still parked by the door, like statues, eyes straight ahead and arms behind their backs. They weren’t going to help her, clearly. Their only order was probably to make sure she wouldn’t escape their surveillance.

Can’t go back, can’t go forward. Something’s got to give.

She turned slowly towards Marcia, leaning in closer to her, modifying her voice into a whisper. Hands deep in her pockets, the plump shape of a leftover nirvana button grazed her fingertips. Tap-tap. They used to have an understanding. In her exalted position, Marcia didn’t like to score her own supply. She pressed the tablet against Marcia’s soft forearm.

“Hey, guess whose lucky day it is?” she teased her, opening and closing her palm under Marcia’s nose.

Alida could see Marcia’s face muscles flinch and her pupils dilate. Her lips parted.

Antonio’s office door suddenly flung open. A Juvenile, fresh out of university, judging by her 2049 graduation arm band, with clear skin and long shiny hair, edged past them and into the lift. There was a glint in the corner of her right eye and she seemed to be shivering.

“Quick, I haven’t seen you,” Marcia snatched the tablet and pushed Alida through the fast-closing doors to Antonio’s office.

“You are fired, I said,” Antonio roared. “Get the hell out and never come back until you learn respect.”

The sliding doors closed behind her and Alida took a lungful of air as she stepped into Antonio's office. She hesitated in the space between two sets of sliding doors, not yet in Antonio's line of sight. He sounded mad. The tension in the air contrasted sharply with the lingering note of delicate perfume, most likely ivy.

She knew better than to talk to her father when he was angry, let alone ask for a favour when he was not in a welcoming mood. She held her breath. He was pacing up and down the room, she could tell. The news was on somewhere in the background. It felt like going into a raging animal's den. The girl's fate was not her business. She must have done something terribly wrong, surely.

She inched forward and came into his line of sight. He was towering over his desk, his hands firmly gripping the back of his Eames chair. The Plexiglas wall projected scrolling news behind him. Still more bodies from the Station attack. Under control. Remain calm. Suspects already identified.

"What the hell are you doing here?" he yelled. "I'm going to fire Marcia. No one does their job anymore around here," his voice pierced the air between them.

She felt small. Helpless. Why can't she ever feel like an adult around her father? What's happening? What's wrong? The muscles in her face felt tense; her voice trapped in her throat.

She limped backwards, muttering an excuse.

The look on Antonio's face changed swiftly from rage to icy friendliness. "I'm sorry, darling, it's not your fault," he said, taking two long strides across the room and placing his hands firmly on her shoulders.

"I...I didn't mean to disturb," she attempted to sound calm, but her voice cracked. She could feel him breathing behind her. Fear, not an uncommon feeling around her father, rose in her chest.

He turned her around. Her body was stiff. A wooden toy in his hands. Despite his age, he was still the reigning Greek-Roman wrestling champion among the Gerontocrats. She buried her head in his chest. A defense move. Pretend she believed it was a genuine embrace. Pretend the iron clasp on his hands did not hurt.

For a second, she thought of the other girl. What might happen to her. Then she dismissed the thought. Being Antonio's daughter was not easy, but he did love her. He would never hurt her.

"Remember, your family is the most important thing in the world." The first lesson he taught her. "Nothing else matters, none of it," he used to add, but then he left it there and she just had to fill in the blanks. So, early on, she knew she could tug at his heart strings, like any child does. Children instinctively know their parents' Achilles' heel and exploit it, shamelessly to get their attention, their time, their approval. And then the day came when she despised herself for doing it, and decided to be the only Juvenile in Cuneo who didn't ask their family to fix them up as with a job. Her father was born in the South. He looked like a Southerner, dark and stocky not willowy like a Northern Italian, like his wife and all her family. As she grew up, she realised that she was his child born in the North, was giving him new roots, a new identity. More than his political career, she was his lifetime accomplishment. When he was holding her, as he was doing now, his fingers clutching her forearms like iron claws, his breath on her face, his eyes locked on hers, she felt him holding on to his new persona, Doctor Antonio Cuneo, the distinguished Gerontocrat statesman. She was the image of his dreams, the mirror of his ambitions, and sometimes that was exhausting.

"Sweetheart, what are you doing here?" His eyes were cold steel. His voice mellifluous. Your interview was this morning, wasn't it? It's not safe on the streets now. Shouldn't you be home now?" he lay his arm around her shoulders, gently. "All Juveniles were ordered home, weren't you?" There was a touch of worry in his voice.

She didn't know where to start though. Her cheeks blanched, her jaw locked. He then did what he always did when she wouldn't respond. He just pulled away, as if to announce, *I'm here when you need me*. He detached himself from her, absent-mindedly, turned away and started following the incoming stream of news scrolling fast on the wall behind his chair. For most of her childhood, she thought he didn't really care and it used to make her angry. Then she realised that even if he was always absent, he had always been there for her when she needed him.

"The Federali have their hands full," he said, shaking his head. "You'd better go home now."

"Dad, I need to talk to you," she finally managed to say, her voice a little more than a rasp. "I've had orders. Permission, whatever. I had to see you."

"Permission? Orders? It must be a mistake," he waved her away, straightened his back, regaining the posture of the important stately person. "I've got a full day, no time for family visits." The concerned father persona was gone. "I've got a meeting in five minutes," he added in a matter-of-fact tone. She could tell his focus was no longer on her. This time he had disconnected. Present absence.

"I know but this must be important. I had orders," she bit her lip. Then she let her voice raise, as if volume was going to help. "Besides, you had time for that young hopeful looking for a Civico knee to park her arse on." She knew it was cheap of her to mention her father's mistresses but playing the jealous child vying for the darling Daddy's attention usually worked.

"Alida, I mean it. All I have is exactly four minutes and thirty seconds," he said impassably, his broad back turned to her. Her tactic seemed to work. She took a big breath, just like before an interview.

"Something happened when I left the interview. I was arrested. The Federali took me in for interrogation," she paused, letting the weight of the words sink in. "I

don't know what they've done to me. I don't know what happened. All I know was when it was over they brought me here." She wasn't sure what he would react to mostly—that she had been taken or that the Federali had experimented on her and she had no recollection of it. What she was sure of was that she got his attention now.

"Interrogation? Alida, what have you done?" He spun round, almost losing his balance. His hands were at his sides, balled into fists. His jaw was tense and his mouth suggested distaste. His face was purple red.

"Nothing, Daddy. I swear. Nothing. I don't understand what all this is about." She paused, taking in his angry expression. "I've been released under permanent guard. I need your help. Look, see for yourself, two Feds are outside waiting for me." She nodded towards the lobby, where the Federali were standing and watching them.

"What?" He barrelled past her to his desk and started pounding at his keyboard frantically, eyes raking the screen, taking the data in. How much of her history could he access? He had a high security clearance; he could probably get the whole story. She closed her eyes, remembering the drones on her way out of the Paper Factory, past curfew. There was going to be a lot of footage online, that's for sure. She just didn't know how much.

After a while, snorting like an angry bull, he lurched towards her.

"You aided and abetted a criminal! Are you mad? What is wrong with you?" he grabbed her shoulders and shook her.

Her limbs felt like putty in his hands. He let go and looked down at his palms, shaking faintly. His breath was ragged and shallow. Alida felt her face reddening and tears pricking her eyes.

"He is not a criminal, he's just someone I knew at university. The head of the Student Association, everybody knew him. Do you remember?"

“That Commoner boy who tried suicide and had your name in his phone? Don’t tell me it’s him again. Don’t you understand how dangerous these runaways are? I had to work hard to get you off the hook then. “He was scrolling down his screen and grinding his teeth, “He used you then and he’s using you now, can’t you tell?” Antonio got up and started pacing up and down the office, turning towards her when he changed direction. “This Otto is not your friend. If he got in touch, he must have wanted something. What was it?”

“He wanted me to erase his record but I said no. Of course I did.”

“Why did you even meet him? He’s gone on the run, I suppose, so he won’t suffer the consequences but you will.” He waved a dismissive hand at her.

As much as she hated to admit it, he was right.

She could sense the blaming and shaming in his voice. He had never liked Otto. Now the force of his distaste was coming through loud and clear. She opened her mouth, like a fish out of water. She tried to say something, but could not find the right words.

An oak panel to their left slid open and a tall, lanky young man popped his head around the door jamb.

“They’re waiting for you, Doctor.”

“Can I have a minute, Giorgio?” Antonio lifted a placatory hand at him. “Offer them a drink. The best whiskey,” he added and dropped his hand by his side, like a lifeless limb.

Giorgio’s head withdrew as quickly as it came in.

“How could you be so stupid. How could you do this to me? To our family.” he approached her menacingly, like a volcano spitting lethal gas intermittently. She could feel her body shake like a rag doll. She had come to him for protection, and he was putting her on trial. She felt the lump in her throat melt. Dig deep. You’ve got to muster

the courage to answer back. The past is the past. She had to deal with the consequences now and he must help her.

“It’s always about you or mum getting your reputation stained because of me,” her finger stabbed the air, blind with tears. She didn’t want to guilt trip him but that was the only way she knew how to get him to pay attention. So childish, she thought, as the words left her tongue. “But this is about me, Daddy, not you. I don’t even know why I was ordered to come here. Can you help me? It’s as simple as that,” she added, calmly.

He fell silent, then strode towards the wall which rolled back to reveal glasses, a bar and a drinks fridge. From the chiller he pulled out a ready-primed syringe of oxygenated blood, flipped off the cap and gave himself an instant shot, pushing the life-giving contents straight into valve implanted in his aorta. She watched him calm down, his chest expanding with every drop, his nostrils flaring, like a wild animal sensing his prey.

Gerontocrats had blood therapy as often as they went to a spa before the Change and her parents were no different. It was the easiest, fastest health boost in the New Italy, but Alida always cringed when she saw people do it. Her father preferred the fresh blood to the chemically engineered substitute, and he could pay for it. It still grossed her out to see him do it, no matter how many times she saw it. All she could think of was the the Juveniles who had to sell their blood to get by. The blood bank marketing ads had a nice doctor in a white coat explaining that your body would produce new blood so you didn’t really lose anything anyway. On some internal scale, inbuilt since birth, she had a visceral sense that the blood harvest was wrong.

He shook his head, as if experiencing a brain freeze.

“Look, it must be a misunderstanding,” she said, approaching his wall, trying to read her file backwards, but all she could see was pages of coding. She’d better push

now, before he became angry again. She knew how this went. He'd have an IV, calm down for a bit then go through the roof again.

"I swear I didn't do anything, Daddy. I went to meet him, yes. I thought I could persuade him to come back. He said he wanted to tell me something about Foreclosure. I was curious, that's all. It's such a mystery, and you've never said anything!

"No child of mine is going into Foreclosure, Alida. That's why. No need."

"I know, but I was frightened. I made a mistake, I'm sorry, but I didn't do anything wrong. Except get my access permit extended retrospectively, but the officer was OK with that. I am sure it's just a big, fat misunderstanding." Her heart battered her ribs, her mouth dry. "I didn't do anything wrong...anything on purpose," she added.

Her mind was busy looking for escape routes. Had she made a mistake in the paperwork for Il Principe? The interview made her so nervous. Surely they couldn't demonstrate intent. That was her story, and she was sticking to it. She looked at Antonio from the corner of her eye. He seemed calm and composed.

"By the way, I got the job, Dad. I thought if I had to come to your office at least I could tell you that. Make you proud." The three little words that always made her father happy. "Do you think I'd jeopardise this for Otto? I haven't seen him in 15 years. Why would I do it?" she reached out to him.

"Why indeed?" he pushed her gently away. "You got the job, then. At last. Well done."

He put down the syringe and poured himself a shot of cognac. The reservoir was only half empty and he was waiting for the valve to clear before topping up.

"What's this job, then?" He started coughing. His hands were shaking, he was more moved than he might have wanted to let on, she thought.

“It’s with the Heritage division. Mapping out the Bloody Brigades’ industrial hide-outs.” She paused to take in his movements. He hesitated imperceptibly before he took his second shot. His eyes were alight, fixed on her.

“All I did was meet Otto for a few minutes. I swear that’s all. I’ve got a job now, I’m OK, you and Mummy really can be proud of me. Can’t you just get the Federali off my back, please? Please, Daddy. They’d listen to you. I am a loyal Citizen, I don’t deserve this, not any of it.” She could hear the despair.

“Why do you think they’d listen to me? The Federali are not under my direction, you know.” His face was a picture of pain, as if asking for a personal favour was going to cost him a lot more than he was ready to pay. “You must have done something, Alida.”

“The guy in charge...Friske or something...reacted reverently to your name.” She noticed her dad’s face muscles twitch.

“I see,” he gulped the drink down. “I’ll do what I can, I’ve got time to make a call. But this is serious. I can’t promise anything. Friske - you said- was his name?”

She nodded and he strode towards the far wall with a renewed sense of purpose. He turned his back on her keyed in a combination that raised the soundproof shield for confidential calls around him.

Behind the shield she saw him pacing up and down. The transparent walls of the soundproof booth were distorting his face. He kept turning to her from time to time. His eyes were tired, his smile contrived. As much as she tried, she couldn’t read his lips.

Giorgio’s head popped back in. His face was expressionless, but his eyes inquired her silently as to how long the Doctor was going to be.

“Just a minute,” she smiled at him. Giorgio’s curly hair head disappeared fast, without returning the smile.

Antonio re-emerged from his insulated phone booth. The silence between them was heavy. She followed him with her eyes, not daring to speak, as he made his way towards the side door.

“Alida, there’s good news, and there’s...well, tough news.” His words gave her an electric jolt. She held her breath.

“So tell me. I’m ready.”

“You’re free to go, but you’ll still be under Federali supervision. Undercover, not uniform.”

That didn’t sound that tough after all.

“You’ll take up the new job, but there are conditions. You may think your Otto is just a hopeless Commoner trying to escape euthanasia, but the Feds know him better. They want you to infiltrate the Brigades as their agent.”

“But,” she heard herself croak, “I don’t know anyone. How am I supposed to infiltrate the Brigades? I can tell the Feds everything they want to know about the buildings, not the people that may or may not squat in them.” Her eyes bulged. Her blood boiled. Nails were digging deep into her palms, her face felt ablaze. Not fair.

She felt the weight of the world.

He came close, this time emanating a sense of peace rather than anger. She smelled the sweetness of chocolate and alcohol on his breath. She was going to cry; she could feel the sobs rising up in her throat.

“Look, Alida, you’ve made a mistake. They need to know where your allegiance lies. It could be just a little test, and you could be free to go in no time. You say you don’t know anyone, but the Feds certainly think Otto could help you there.”

There was a dash of hope in his voice, but also a sense of duty.

“I owe Friske now,” he paused. “Of all the people, he’s the last one I would want to owe something to.”

She wanted to ask why, but her mind was overwhelmed with other questions. Existential questions. Friendship questions. She would need to find Otto. Now she wished he hadn't made it out of the country.

"What if I say no?" she asked, hopeful.

"You don't have a choice. I don't have a choice," he said.

As Giorgio's head popped in a third time, Antonio came towards her and gave her a long hug. Then, he slipped something in her hand and whispered in her ear.

"You're going to need this." His voice was soothing.

It was something like a coin, a little heavier than an old Euro piece and a little smaller. "What is it?"

"It's a scheduled pass for a Sci-Tech job. It enhances your natural gifts, such as spatial vision. You're going to need all the edge you can get." He closed her palm, and she felt a jolt his hands, warm but still shaking, holding on to hers.

She couldn't believe he would give her access to government performance-enhancing drugs. They were top secret and Gerontocrats only used them. The majority of Juveniles never knew they existed. She gaped at him, speechless. He had over-articulated each word as if on his death bed.

"Promise me you'll do this."

She knew of these jabs from fragments of Crisis conversations she heard him hold at home at all times of the day and night. The trials had left many dead. What she knew was that they were painful and frequent side effects could be fatal.

"Trust me. You're my daughter, you have my genes. You won't have side effects," he added, as if in response to her thoughts.

She swallowed hard. "I promise." But there were no guarantees, were there?

He disappeared behind the mahogany panel. Giorgio escorted her out of the office and handed her over to the Federali. From the corner of her eyes she saw Marcia struggling not to look satisfied.

The coin pinged GPS directions to the Sci-Tech lab. She showed it to the Federali and raised her shoulders. All part of the official guidance. They'd be replaced by undercover agents soon.

Her heart was a racing but she stood up straighter, slowly gaining control of her posture and her life plan. It was all going to be OK. No Foreclosure, she could have the job. She was going to find a way out of this mess. And the only way out seemed to be through, she decided, ten minutes later, when she was standing in front of the large wall-door of the Sci-Tech lab. Now what? Who was she going to be when she came out of there?

Chapter 5

Gerontocrats, the elite of New Italy, ruled by consensus. They were untouchable. Alliance building, backstabbing, lobbying and throwing others under the bus for sheer entertainment: all part of their staple practice. It didn't matter how many bodies one had to step on to get to the top, because being at the top made it all worthwhile. The Council of Elders' Circus, where the most powerful Gerontocrats of New Italy held their meetings, smelled to Antonio like pure testosterone. A hi-tech room with all the trimmings of experiential technology and the best views of Cuneo, it was located next door to his office.

Alida's visit had disturbed his prep time. Before meetings like this he spent time visualising his movements and rehearsing his punchlines. Anxiety, with its bad omen overtones, lingered in the air. With a slightly wavering voice, he ordered the Room Brain machine to increase the air mix of musk and tobacco before he went in. A knot rose in his throat, and he fought to push it down. He had set up his presentation of the Master Plan, ready to go on his verbal cue "Start." He rested his forehead against the great oak door and the wood felt cold against his skin. In that moment, it felt like an obstacle to overcome . . . like an insurmountable climbing pitch or a wide, bottomless river. He took a deep breath and pushed down on the door handle. Oxygen rushed through his veins like a mountain spring. The transfusion worked. He was pleased.

It was his favourite room in the Gerontocrats' Palace, and he often came here to admire the views, especially during the mandatory days off, at the end of each Labour Month. But when the Elders' Councils were in session, which was every other work Quartet, more or less the length of a pre-Change week, the atmosphere changed. He always felt as if he was not good enough . . . as if he had something to prove. And yet, he only had to gaze outside the floor-to-ceiling windows to see two of his greatest

accomplishments—the Good Wall and the Killing Fields—reminding him that he was one of the brightest minds of New Italy. And over those man-made triumphs soared Monte Cervino. The mountain he also counted among his victories, because he had conquered that great peak as a young man, even though the climb had almost killed him. Now the summit towered over the Good Wall and the Killing fields with the sun setting behind it, casting a long shadow over them.

He had come a long way since his early days as an entry-level Engineer One in New Italy; he admitted that to himself. But he wanted so much more. The ambition of the southerner, boiling in his veins, was to be acknowledged as Supreme Leader. One day, his dream would come true. All he needed to do was make the right alliances among the Elders. It was a numbers game. And he was good with numbers.

He scanned the room as he entered, zooming in on Il Principe's formerly wrinkled face, now dry and flat like an Egyptian papyrus. The latest operation must have worked. He made a mental note to dispense a quick compliment. It was unlikely he would have too long to wait for an Elder position to become open, he reckoned, given the rate of upgrade operations per Elder capita. The more operations, the more lifetime risk; surely they knew that. But he wasn't in the truth business. He was in the hope business. And he promised himself to be there and to seize the opportunity to give the Elders hope for a new, more successful era.

“Good morning, Enlightened Elders,” he greeted those present as he strode across the room. There were fresh flowers in a human-sized vase in the middle of the room. He nodded in the direction of Giorgio, acknowledging his thoughtful touch, and dismissed him with a stern frown.

“Looking very juvenile today, Antonio,” said Elder 12, the youngest of the Elders at 69 years old and Camilla's uncle. A roar of laughter followed. Elder 12, formerly known as Franco, could always be counted on to burst his bubble.

Antonio's upper lip raised in a sneer. His muscles tensed, but, unfazed, he continued to make his rounds and shake the hands of the Elders one by one, sustaining their gazes. When he reached the pulpit, he felt a lump as hard as a pebble in his throat. He swallowed hard and forced himself to smile, although every fibre in his body was swelling with anger. The twelve nonagenarian Elders, comfortable in the pale Ettore Sottsass Mandarin chairs, were syncing their devices into the experiential presentation system. He waited for Elder 1, Il Principe, to finish linking up, and then he cleared his throat.

"Whenever you're ready." Il Principe's expressionless face made his blood curdle. The pebble in his throat wouldn't melt away no matter how hard he tried to swallow.

Antonio opened his arms invitingly. "I'd like to use this meeting to present some ideas I've been working on. New Italy is safe inside the Killing Fields, and inspired by the Good Wall. Now I believe it is time to consider how our citizens will live in the security we have created for them. The time has come for New Italy to have a Master Plan."

With a swipe across the hologram screen in front of him, he started the full-body, multi-sensory experience. The Elders were suddenly immersed in a bespoke, stimulating bath of the senses that he deftly controlled remotely.

"Nine hundred and ninety-nine victims this morning, Enlightened Elders," he began. "Nearly fifty thousand have died in terrorist violence since The Change . . . all claimed by the Bloody Brigades." He paused as visual beams projected gory scenes among them so close that one could reach out and touch them.

The Elders were virtually transported to the Piazza della Stazione, as if in a time and space capsule, and stood on the scenes of these crimes. Dismembered bodies were inches from their faces, and splattered blood dripped onto their skin. Eviscerated torsos

and limbs scattered everywhere across the square. In the pitch dark of the room, the reel of bloodstained images scrolled all around them. The smell of burned flesh filtering through the system made Antonio retch. He touched the olfactory sign on the screen that sent more musk and tobacco scents towards his face and more wretched smells towards the Elders.

The flickering light of the screen illuminated the room like clouds scudding across the sky in an endless wave of dark and light.

Il Principe was immobile, his eyes glued to the screen. Franco covered his nose and mouth. Arturo, Elder #5, a former Army General and presently Commander-in-Chief of New Italy's combined forces, who also held the national veteran Iron Man record, eyed the scene of carnage expertly, something like a smile of satisfaction on his thin lips.

Antonio switched off the images, and the room sank into darkness. His voice thundered. "We are not controlling our Juveniles, dear colleagues. It's clear that New Italy's Two-Track Foreclosure Programme is done. It's dead. We need a solution and we need it fast."

Darkness and silence were his favourite elements, one reinforcing the other and reminding him of the origins of it all. Let there be light—his light.

This was the toughest part of his presentation. He knew this much. He corrected his posture, pulling back his shoulders, and moved away from the pulpit.

"The Two-Track Foreclosure Programme has taken us out of the pre-Change economic rut. We're safe from outside invasion, and we are prospering."

There were nods all around. It was something they could all agree on, getting them to say yes before they could say no.

The Council, the self-selected senior leaders who had seen Italians through the storm of the financial and demographic collapse at the turn of the millennium, had been

in power for the second part of their adult lives. They had lived all the events in real time. And yet, the full-immersion experience had managed to bring it back from the depths of their memories as if it were happening again, in real time, in front of their eyes: scrawny children and starving families demonstrating on the streets of pre-Change Italy. Jobs. Income. Family. They had asked for it. People had demanded New Italy, the New Rule. Save us. Do something.

He had thrown in the famous graphs of the double-down trend as a memento: plummeting demographics and shrinking job market. The vicious circle, the downward spiral: no jobs, no families, no children. No future. No Italy. No jobs, no families, no children. Repeat.

Antonio liked to show this over and over again, to remind them that they needed him as much as he needed them.

“For fifteen years, our Two-Track Foreclosure Programme has been a neoliberal feast, a celebration of the invisible hand of the market. We let young people choose their degrees. We let them choose their life partners. We let the market absorb the rightly qualified. We let those who wanted children start families as they pleased. And we have since foreclosed only the surplus—those who, on their thirty-third birthdays, were neither in employment nor raising a family. The Programme was successful in the beginning, but now we have to ask if it is still fit for purpose.”

Elder #5, the General, projected his powerful voice from his chair: “With terrorist incidents every week? You never controlled the Programme. The Brigades came about because of the incompetent Civico control. There’s only one solution, now. Hand the whole thing over to the Federali now, crack down on the Deserters and wipe out the Brigades.”

“It’s a disaster. A debacle!” Franco jumped on the bandwagon. “Juveniles are absconding because Foreclosure is the worst-kept secret since the nutrition capsule’s

ingredients list was spelled out on the government channel.” He waved an angry fist. “There’s no security any more. Everyone knows young people will disappear pretty soon after they reach 33, even if they don’t know exactly how. Your people are careless! That’s bound to create resistance. You’ve allowed the Brigades to come into existence. It’s your fault.” He pointed at Antonio in accusation.

Silence filled the air.

A cold shiver suddenly gripped Antonio’s insides. He couldn’t allow this presentation to turn sour, let alone become the pyre on which his enemies would sacrifice him and his lifetime’s work. Now that the seed of doubt had been planted in their minds, he needed to take back control. His fingers pressed into the desk until his knuckles turned white. He coughed with authority and then looked around the room, staring everyone into silence.

“That is why, dear colleagues, I have asked for your attention this afternoon. The Two-Track Programme has failed because of divided leadership. Our leadership. We are all responsible. Demographic control under the Ministry of Youth; education progress under the Ministry of Science; employment under the Ministry of Jobs; and Foreclosure, migration and suicides under the Federali. Each one of you has a part of the responsibility, and you need to own it. If you point the finger at me, guess what? It comes right back at you.”

He screened their faces. There was frustration, anger, contempt and a few slight nods.

“We’ve made mistakes, all of us,” he added, his tongue sweet as honey. “But it’s not too late,” he said reassuringly.

“Go on,” said Il Principe, resting his chin on his chest.

Now that Il Principe had spoken, it felt like a new lease on life . . . deep diaphragm breath. The dogs of criticism were on a leash, licking the foam at their mouths.

“Gentlemen, allow me to introduce to you the Master Plan.” Antonio opened his arms like Jesus on the cross. He relaxed his upper body, inviting them to make themselves comfortable. The muscles in his jaw were still tense, but he attempted a smile nonetheless. He felt cold sweat under his armpits and at the base of his spine.

“We’ve been trying to fit a square peg into a round hole all this time and it isn’t working. Our strategy was to use the Central Database to match Juveniles with the number of existing jobs and, if necessary, to create more jobs from within our government institutions to stabilise the supply and demand. But I believe that we’ve been looking at the labour market the wrong way. Rather than a drain on our economy, Juveniles are a resource, the black gold that will allow the Gerontocrats eternal youth and New Italy eternal prosperity.” He stressed every word of the last sentence.

The Holy Grail was within reach, and he was offering it to them on a silver platter. The Elders leaned forward. He could sense the anticipation in each one of them like springs coiled up ready to release.

The next set of 4D full-immersion settings popped up on the hologram screen at a click of the mouse. The deserts of the United Arab Emirates before the discovery of oil lay in front of them, parched and desolate. Then, the economic boom that ensued was illustrated by skyscrapers rising up in the desert; the Emiratees swimming in pools of money, enjoying leisure, luxury and endless possibilities.

“History repeats itself, as you can all appreciate. They dreamed of immortality. They had all the money in the world. And yet money could not buy it . . .”

Antonio paused for effect.

“Are you going to make us rich beyond our dreams, Antonio?” Franco’s voice resonated from the front of the room.

“Are you going to make us immortal, Antonio?” followed Il Principe.

His body was inundated in a cone of light, a beam tingling his face in an uncomfortable way. In the pitch-dark room, it was as close as he’d ever felt to being a god.

“We, the Elders of New Italy, will be both rich and immortal.” He heard his voice, deeper than usual. “Here’s how the Master Plan will help us get there.” The anticipation was palpable. He had them in the palm of his hand.

He swiped forward. Scenes from the future unrolled. Antonio’s prototype was modelled on the solar system, with the Gerontocrats’ lives at the centre like the sun and the Juveniles orbiting around them like planets. Steaming between them, like a multi-layered Japanese highway, were thousands of babies created where three light-streams converged, representing reproduction, income and organ-harvesting. The streams, like industrial conveyor belts, poured their benefits into the Gerontocrats’ eco-system and functioned like drip feeds, bringing new lives, new blood, new organs, new thoughts, new connections.

“The Master Plan will have one leader: the Minister of Health, Longevity and Prevention of Suicides. No power struggles. One command and control head. We will have an end-to-end system that divides young people into three classes: the Breeders, the Pre-Civics and the Bodies. We ourselves will be the invisible hand of the market.”

“How does this work?” Il Principe raised a bony, ringed finger, interrupting him.

Blood rushed to Antonio’s face, and he felt the need to touch his ears and scratch his chin.

“My vision is to keep us, the Gerontocrat class, from whom all peace and prosperity derives, alive and in good health for as long as possible. Immortality is

within our means, so why should we not take the benefit? Our longevity benefits New Italy, that is beyond question.” He coughed softly. “For this to happen, we need a new class of Breeders—Juveniles who are born for reproduction. At the end of their reproductive life, they will not be wasted but become resources, bodies ready for organ harvest. The Breeders are fundamental for the illusion we want to create, that Italy proudly remains a republic founded on the family.”

“Hear, hear,” said Franco. The other Elders echoed his words.

“A second type of Juvenile will be bred for their intelligence and ability to carry out non-robotised Civic tasks,” resumed Antonio. “They will be raised as pre-Civics, paired up with existing Civics whom they will replace in due time. Screening, selection, no more interviews. Nothing will be left to chance. Only a small number of Civics will eventually replace Gerontocrats, because our life span will be prolonged as much as we desire. The system has no waste. Any excess automatically gets allocated to the harvest programme.”

“What happens if there is a shortage of Juveniles?” asked Elder #9, who was seated to Franco’s right. He was closer to death than any of them, judging by his frail body and deep-sunk eyes left pale and almost sightless as his body rejected artificial lenses. “What happens with those left over?” added another, who was seated between Franco and Elder #5.

Antonio heard with delight the interest in their voices. Clearly, some were motivated by immortality, some by profit and others likely by both. It was going to be difficult to keep their interest piqued and deliver on the big promise. However, all in all, he felt he had turned a corner. Using the back of his hand, he wiped away the sheen of sweat on his upper lip.

“The whole system is set up to be controlled precisely for the Breeders and Pre-Civics. The supply needs to match the demand. However, all things being equal, we

will need a serious oversupply of bodies. The first two categories will keep our society ticking. The third category is going to ensure the Gerontocrats' immortality, enhanced public health and New Italy's longer-term economic survival."

Nodding heads around the room gave him a confidence boost. He had struck a chord.

"The bodies themselves will be the black gold. They are the future economy of the New Italy," he reiterated. Over-communicate. Repeat, repeat, repeat.

"I assume you're going to tell us how this is all going to work for us?" asked Il Principe, drumming his fingers on the reclined Ettore armchair. He tilted his head backwards, allowing the space between them to expand.

"Certainly," Antonio obliged. He scrolled the screen in front of him until he found a hidden folder where he kept his prototype projects. He looked around the room to ensure everyone's eyes were fixed on him. With a demonstrative gesture, he plugged in the surround system experience. Images and sounds of a prototype body-harvesting plant filled the room.

"This is Vinadio," he projected his voice powerfully over the plant's rhythmic noise. "This is the organ-harvesting plant based on the current Two-Track Programme." A series of quick graphs followed: the value of an organ on the market, the total income for New Italy from the current programme and the main trading partners. The usual suspects, Germany and China, with high-demand and ageing populations, topped the rankings.

"The current Foreclosure programme is inefficient. We're dying while we're bleeding money. Enough is enough."

Antonio rubbed his forehead and projected forward an open palm, slicing the air in front of him.

“The time has come for full Foreclosure,” he thundered across the room. This was his Master Plan. His baby. His legacy.

Antonio took a deep breath, bit his lip and held the air in his chest for an extra second. He tasted the salt of his own sweat in his mouth. This was what power felt like. He could sense the eyes of the twelve Elders lit up in the darkness, their ears perked up, their nostrils flared . . . predators sensing blood.

“I propose a system in which no human resource will ever be wasted. I invite you to meet the Bodies.”

The screen lit up. Regular Juveniles were running towards them. They were so close, so real that the Elders recoiled simultaneously in their chairs.

“One hundred million Juvenile organs in the pipeline. Each Gerontocrat will enjoy a fifty-years-of-life extension with the quality of life of a forty-year-old. At the onset of ageing, a Gerontocrat will go into ‘service’ for a month and come out fully upgraded. Five organs for each one of us over our lifetimes. That’s all it takes.”

The oxygen was thin in the air. He was certain of their undivided attention so pressed on.

“We are experiencing a demographic bulge at the moment and a chronic shortage of jobs. To regulate the market, we need to max out the Foreclosure intake to ninety-nine percent of the thirty-three-year-old generation. The yield will be one hundred million organs.”

A collective sigh was followed by hands up.

“What if the supply is higher than the demand? What then?” asked Franco.

“Full Foreclosure means full recycling—no waste. Full profitability,” Antonio added calmly. “We anticipate that we’ll have a fully stocked reserve bank. Once that’s replenished, excess organs will be directly exported. Our organs, created in Italy, are premium-quality merchandise. For decades our country has led the world in every field

of gerontology, in transplants, stem cell technology and post-menopausal pregnancy. We have an international reputation and we have the human resources. The organs of the Juveniles are to Italy what oil was to Dubai.”

He needn't say more. His case was bulletproof. He held his breath and let silence fill the room.

“Fine.” Il Principe nodded curtly. “What do you need from us?” he asked.

“Two things: permission to start full Foreclosure now. Second: upscale the health system to cope with the bodies.” It felt good to bring a deal to closure... all his hard work had paid off.

“We obviously need more Federali and more propaganda.” The ex-army Elder squirmed in his chair.

“Certainly!” Antonio nodded, acknowledging the Elder. Let the power-grabbing games begin.

“You have all my support then,” the ex-army Elder stressed.

Then, the Elders turned away from him, talking in pairs, in small groups, nodding and exchanging quick words. He blinked fast. Surely, they were estimating their wealth . . . the benefits of living forever . . . if there was any catch. There was nothing he could do right now, except wait. Greed at work.

Antonio's mouth was dry. He would have given anything for another sip of cognac. He moved nonchalantly to the table in the middle of the room, his back straight, and started pouring shots for each Elder. At the end, he downed his one-inch glass in the blink of an eye. It scorched the inside of his throat but took the edge off the moment.

Then, suddenly, the room went quiet.

“What's next then, Antonio?” Franco's voice pierced the air, signalling to Antonio a collective agreement to continue.

“We have the technical basis to begin the new Programme at once, and nothing to gain by delay, either. Foreclosure messages are currently transmitted to the pre-Foreclosure Juveniles through their earpieces,” he replied, almost too fast, seeming too eager. He couldn’t allow himself to let them see that he knew he had won. He had to play his hand till the end.

“We will conduct a blanket extraction of pre-employment Juveniles within twenty-four hours. Anyone not in employment, regardless of their age, will be taken off the streets, from their homes, wherever they are. We will take them to the triage camps that are currently used in the dual track process. These will be turned into Full Foreclosure triage camps, and —” Antonio felt sweat sheening his forehead. He shook his head slightly and moved out of the spotlight into dimmer light. His sight sharpened. The Elders seemed tall like trees, backs upright, hands resting on their armchairs.

“What about public opinion?” Elder #5 cut him off.

“At the same time we’ll launch a marketing drive. All that’s necessary is to adjust the emphasis in the normal programming messages. Breeders will be praised, rewarded. Pre-Civicos will be paired up with Civicos. They will be unaware that the rest will be extracted from society and turned into Bodies.” He did whatever a good leader should do—paint a picture of a smooth change. “But I’m confident that this will take place without a public reaction. Everyone will be too busy with the transformations in their own lives to pay attention to the bigger picture.”

Elder #5, always thinking like a soldier, always anticipating civil unrest. “Do you expect Juveniles to remain unaware indefinitely? What if the word gets out about Full Foreclosure?” asked Il Principe.

“The details of the Master Plan will not leave this room,” Antonio reassured the Elders. “It is important for clinical reasons that those whose will become Bodies feel no

stress or anxiety, so I suggest the highest level of security from the start. Creatures in distress release toxins, and so we want the Juveniles' organs to be toxin-free."

"And how exactly will you do that?" asked Franco.

"I propose to draft the Juveniles in employment Brigades to secure the Good Wall. We will call them front-liners in the fight against the Barbarians. You see where I'm going with this?" asked Antonio, motioning towards view from the window of the horizon and the Good Wall.

Franco, hearing the cue Antonio had given him in their secret discussions, stood up and took charge. "Well, we just need to step up the anti-Barbarian narrative. People need to know how Barbarians are fuelling the Bloody Brigades' criminality and stealing the Juveniles' jobs." His hands moved animatedly. The Elders nodded and hummed.

Il Principe leaned forward. "Indeed, we still have the small issue of the Bloody Brigades." His breathing was jagged, and his chest raised arrhythmically. Elder #2 turned up the power on his oxygen tank. Il Principe nodded appreciatively.

Elder #5, the General, mirrored Il Principe's body language. His eyes narrowed as he focused on Antonio as if he was going to shoot him. Antonio sighed heavily. He felt he had managed a huge breakthrough, and yet the awkward squad could still cause trouble.

He had not intended to mention his daughter. Family was family. But it was the only way to convince the Elders that he had skin in the game.

"Well, our future is in safe hands. It is my honour to announce that my own daughter has just been recruited to a new security initiative that will be spearheading the government's efforts to stamp out the Brigades."

"I beg your pardon?" Franco jumped out of his corner chair, nearly knocking over the middle table. "Does her mother, my sister know about this?"

Antonio took a deep breath, his lungs starved of oxygen.

“I’ve just been told that she was hired as Industrial Building Inspector by the Cultural Division under the supervision of I Federali. Her job is to smoke out the Brigades from their rat holes. They’ll be terminated soonest. You can rest assured.” Antonio spoke with confidence.

“I’m impressed. Your own daughter, Antonio. Considering the little blunder in my office recently, she really shows dedication to the cause,” replied Il Principe. “A way to make amends, perhaps?”

Antonio gave a short, awkward bow.

“Sometimes, New Italy prevails over our own interests, sir. I’ll make sure no blunders happen again.” He puffed out his cheeks and exhaled slowly.

“Great. You have twenty-four hours to get this rolling. Better get to work.” It was the wrap-up signal. The Elders switched off their 4D surroundings and put the chairs into gear. One by one, they zapped out of the room.

Elder #5, the General, stayed behind.

“Arturo, I know what you’re going to say. I will do everything to make sure we coordinate with I Federali and if that means more men on the streets we’ll get them there.” Antonio raised his palm, appeasing an invisible fear he sensed in the Elder. “You don’t have to worry. If there is a security issue, we’ll put the troops in sooner rather than later.” Antonio shook his right hand and patted him on the shoulder, feeling the corded sinews of Arturo’s lean frame. The Elder’s tense muscles relax under his hand.

He then took one of the bottles on the table and nodded invitingly towards Arturo, who refused him silently. The brandy was cold, the taste of success on the tip of his tongue, with a bitter aftertaste.

“We are in charge, Antonio,” Arturo’s jaw was so tense he seemed to be speaking through his teeth in an icy whisper. “You don’t tell Combined Forces what to do. You don’t coordinate with us. We coordinate with you. Don’t fool yourself.”

Antonio felt his hand shake and quickly put down the glass. The mix of tiredness and surprise hit him like a punch in the gut.

“Let’s talk, Antonio. I know exactly what you’re after here. “You’ll get your Elder’s position when I become Il Principe.” Arturo’s tight lip curled back in a snarl. Antonio stood stock still for a second.

“So, yes, let’s work together. Help me get what I want, and you’ll get what you want,” Arturo spoke calmly but his knuckles were white as he gripped the armrests of his chair.

This was high treason. Plotting to take Il Principe’s place could get them both killed. Antonio couldn’t even process what Arturo was saying. He couldn’t even think the thought.

“Think about it.” Arturo wagged a finger at him and then swivelled his chair around and left. He thought he heard him say, “Remember, we have Alida,” but he couldn’t be sure. His brain filled in the gaps of silence with his worst fears. His ears were pounding and his heart beating so hard he could see the fabric of his shirt quiver.

Nothing to do but finish the brandy. To hell with the Healthy Citizen Programme. Some things were more important than serving New Italy.

Chapter 6

The door to her parents' apartment in Berlusconi Square was strangely ajar. Familiar sounds floated in the air as she crossed the threshold into the hall. Her earpiece hummed back to life, drenching her brain with new selection of post-millennial soft pop. The nutrition machine gurgled loudly behind the closed kitchen door. The Room Brain well-being system welcomed her with a joyful squeak. The sounds of her parents' house, usually annoying, felt soothing compared to the bustling of the streets.

The two Federali had stopped following her at the entrance of the building and took up a position beside the pillars of portico. They could track her through her health band or synch up with the Room Brain. Perhaps she could lose them if she used the building rooftops. But then she'd be a fugitive. Her health band squeezed her wrist and showed code-red hygiene, which indicated the need for a shower. For once, she tended to agree with the device.

She called out "Mamma!" But there was no reply—unusual, since Camilla, the ultimate people-to-people surveillance system of New Italy, was always at home.

The house was drowned in darkness and silence. There was something eerie about its lifelessness. Then she pushed herself into motion, climbing two stairs at a time and unzipping her neoprene suit. Her hands were clammy, her skin prickled. She probably needed more than a shower. Maybe a decontamination purge was also in order.

Drowsiness washed over her, leaving her struggling to keep her eyes open. She hesitated, then began to climb the stairs and then halfway up, she stopped in her tracks. There was a miniature heart-shaped hot-air balloon hovering in front of her closed bedroom door at the top of the stairs.

Upon closer examination, a tiny box, made from pink origami paper, was hanging from it. She picked it up and rested it neatly in the palm of her hand. Colour, after an entire day of black, white and grey, was good for her eyes. Someone had splashed some cash on the black market, she mused, as she followed the neat corners of the box with her forefingers. Couldn't be Otto, surely. Quick, trembling fingers unfolded the wrapping. Every fibre in her body wanted it to be him. He could have arranged an anonymous delivery. He could have reached out to one of their common friends. If there was no message inside the box, she'd understand. At a minimum, it meant something to him to see her again. Maybe it was a small thank-you for asking her to cover up for him. Did he know how much trouble he'd got her in?

She wasn't ready for the "Will you marry me?" scribbled inside. Marco. She dropped the note to the floor, a wounded origami bird falling out of the sky. She sat down on the stairs and rested her head in her hands.

In the hall below the doors of the lounge were flung open, startling her. She hit the alarm on her wristband connecting to the Federali.

A crowd of party people with high-pitched voices fuelled by too much drink spilled into the lobby. Bubbly greetings poured out of the crowd like freshly uncorked Prosecco. "Congratulations!", "You'll make a beautiful couple!", "*Auguri*⁷."

What's up with the enthusiasm? She wasn't going to get married. Not to Marco, not to anyone. What the . . .?

She leaned over the steel handrail. Out of the mob of well-wishers, her Romeo stepped forward, crawling up the stairs towards her. She cringed. The room felt cold with everyone's eyes on her. Her mother's friends, some faraway relatives she never paid enough compliments to . . . blurry faces . . . pasted-on smiles. She felt

⁷ Auguri (Italian, plural) = Congratulations

uncomfortable at the top of the stairs, curious eyes pinning her to the wall. And half-undressed. She pulled the slimy suit back on. It would have to do for the occasion.

“For everything, there is a season, la la la!” her earpiece blasted.

“Not now,” she groaned.

Marco’s grin froze on his face. His cheeks were flushed. Long, dark curls begged to be tucked away behind his ears. He looked lonely, halfway up the stairs, stuck between her and them.

Even if she saw the crowd downstairs as her idea of hell, especially with her mother’s triumphant gaze fixed on her, she definitely didn’t think of herself as Marco’s heaven. She stared at him, silently begging him not to continue with the proposal.

At some point during their relationship, she had dreamed of the proposal. A proper, romantic set-up, just the sort of thing they set as a project in Relational Training. Somewhere by the sea, wind fluttering through her long hair. A long, flowery dress. Barefoot. But then, deep down, she always knew that the text-book cliché was not what she wanted. Now that it was happening, it made her aware of her physical reaction to the idea. Where was the switch-off button? She felt like crawling backwards into her past, reversing her life to the point when they had been algorithmically matched and cancelling every decision that had led her down this path. She shouldn’t have said yes in the beginning. She had been weak.

The crowd suddenly burst into cheers, popping balloons. There was clapping, which Alida’s brain recorded like the rhythm of a rusty machine gun.

Two strides and the long-limbed Marco was kneeling at her feet. She looked his way and saw an obscenely large diamond ring sparkling on his open palm.

“Will you . . .?”

She felt her cheeks redden. Her head was spinning. She was silent. Actually she was biting her lips so much that it hurt. Tears were pricking the backs of her eyelids. Marco didn't seem to read any of her body's clues, which made her blood boil.

Noises faded somewhere in the background. Dead silence, breaths held all around. A thousand eyes were searing her skin. The more she hesitated, the higher the collective anxiety in the room. Myriad little hairs rose on the back of her neck. Marco came next to her, helped her up, a protective hand resting on her midriff, claiming her. She could sense the anticipation in the room, bottled up and ready to pop, her "yes" an expected formality. The free-flowing champagne fountain in the middle of the room reminding her that time was ebbing away from her, the metallic blue eyes of her mother piercing the air between them, Marco's alcohol breath on her neck.

"I am sorry. Marco, I can't. I can't, not like this. I can't marry you." She covered her mouth with her cupped hands and then rested her forehead in her palms. Her eyelids were blazing hot.

Marco bounded up the last step and flung his arms around her. She struggled free and ran past him, just in time to come meet the two Federali as they came through the door.

The crowd gasped. From the corner of her eye she saw Marco scramble to balance on the stairs, shaking his head in disbelief.

"Welcome, officers. Do make yourselves at home. Look, there are canapés and champagne. Please, help yourselves." She nodded to people on her left and right. The group had parted awkwardly, letting her through, automatically starting with the kisses and the handshakes. "Thank you all so much for coming." What else to say? But when she got to Camilla she said, "Nice one, Mother." Never one to lose herself in social settings, Camilla was now paler than the whitewashed wall behind her. The sight of two officers of the law apparently at her daughter's beck and call disconcerted her.

The expression on her mother's face at the sight of the Federali was new. She had often wondered what would crack Camilla's façade of politeness and this moment—this moment right here in front of her friends—was beyond anything she had ever imagined. No matter how much she relished it, though, there was a bittersweet taste in her mouth. In her fantasies, she disappeared soon after her revenge, so there were never any consequences. But there was no escaping this mess. Marco was coming down the stairs, his face looking as if it needed to be put back together.

There was a champagne fountain in the corner of the room and now it erupted, sprinkling the bubbly everywhere. What was supposed to be a triumphant moment was quickly turning into an awkward disaster. But in terms of social currency, this was gold. No one really wanted to leave until they saw the entire debacle unfold.

Anxiety and alcohol, a lovely pair. Somebody put a glass in her hand, and she downed it and then refilled it quick in succession. She shook her head, as if trying to distribute the alcohol evenly throughout her body. Her head felt heavy, her muscles tense and her throat an open wound.

"Everybody, I would like to toast myself!" she heard herself shout. "We do have something to celebrate. I've got a job, everyone!" She saw her glass was full again and she raised it in the direction of the Federali. "Look at my lovely escorts," she hiccupped. "No more Foreclosure songs for me! Wish me good luck, everyone!"

"Well done!" "Congratulations!" "Here's to you, Alida!" from the crowd, though they sounded confused. Maybe they were hoping that getting a job at last had unhinged her temporarily and she'd come to her senses tomorrow. Her glass was full again and she took it into the kitchen, swinging the door shut behind her with her ankle.

Someone else would clean up the social disaster in the hall. She had had enough of everyone's expectations of how she should behave. Camilla was probably busy now smoothing things over, trying to cover things up. Good luck explaining the Federali's

presence. “Pickle, pickle on the wall, tell me what I’m looking for.” She stared at her reflection in the steel worktop, her face blurry and distorted, and suddenly smashed the glass into it.

If a female Juvenile was married, she was not eligible for Foreclosure. If she hadn’t got that job, would she have chosen Foreclosure over marriage? In retrospect, everyone was brave and principled, and she didn’t feel she would have been any different. She was just thankful that she didn’t have to prove what she was made of. But she had been so close to that awful choice. She felt sick just thinking about it. Outside the kitchen window, Cuneo by night seemed a brightly lit amusement park. Zip rails, rainbows and intermittent blue lights of the Federali blue twinkled all across the city. She looked at her wrist. Time was slipping away. The coin her father had given her was vibrating in her pocket. She had to go get her Sci-Tech injection, as her father had asked her to. By dawn, she had to report to her new job.

She keyed in an AttentionSpan capsule in the nutrition machine. It popped out before she was done with her order. Whatever happened to good, strong coffee? she thought, rummaging through the drawers and coming up empty-handed. The AS was strong but left a chemical aftertaste in her mouth. Beggars can’t be choosers, though, she thought, sucking the marrow out of the AS capsule.

From the hall, she heard people starting to leave. Her mother was saying goodbye. “Thank you for coming . . . so lovely of you.” Controlled, dominating, unemotional. To Camilla this was just one more crisis that needed to be managed. The blue-blood Piedmontese poise came through in her elegantly modulated voice. Keeping up appearances was a full-time job, and her mother excelled at it. She closed her eyes. Soon, her mother would storm into the kitchen and tell her what a disgrace she was.

“Do you have any idea what you have just done?” Marco’s anguished voice was behind her. “You know we’ll be the talk of Cuneo, right?”

Alida pulled her roaming mind back, swayed across the room, avoiding the glass shards and the pools of Prosecco, and rested her body against the countertop.

“Sweetheart, don’t throw this—us—away because of a job,” Marco stopped at a safe distance from her, next to the capsule machine. He seemed fidgety, sweat beading on his forehead. He bit his lower lip to stop it from trembling. He emanated power and raw energy. The heat of his body radiated towards her like an unwanted scorching sun. The broken glass stem was cold in her hand like a scalpel.

“Imagine the amazing progeny we will have,” he coaxed her. “Our genes pooled together, our wealth merged. We will be the new Medici, the new Sforza. New Italy needs our children. You can’t say no, surely!” He pleaded with her, New Italy’s diligent son.

She closed her eyes and wondered whether he actually felt anything more than duty. She opened her eyes and turned towards him, tears rolling down her cheeks. “It sounds like you want my name, my genes, not who I am—”

Before she managed to finish her sentence, he was upon her and had wrestled the glass stem out of her hand. With his breath on her face, he muttered through his teeth, keeping her wrists locked and the small of her back pressed against the countertop:

“You, you, you. What about me?” he exclaimed. “How can you do this to me?”

She froze, her oxygen pushed out of her lungs, his weight overwhelming her. She started coughing.

“Who do you think you are, darling?” Camilla’s voice emerged from behind Marco’s like poisonous gas from the mouth of a volcano. She had pulled the door shut behind her. There was an eerie silence in the apartment. Operation Usher-Home-the-Party-Goers had been successful.

Marco slid off her. She escaped his grip, leaned onto the windows and inhaled mouthfuls of air, turning her back to both Marco and Camilla. Words pricked the barrier of her lips. She attempted to speak and choked. After a while, she cleared her throat, and then a wave of angry words burst out, flooding the silence.

“You always try to clean up after me, you perfect hostess.” She pronounced the “pur” in perfect, like a cat. “I am not you! Leave me alone!” Alida shouted, trying to get away. They were standing side by side, between her and the door. United against her, the rebel, the one who would not say yes.

“What is this nonsense about a job?” Camilla advanced towards her. When she got close, at arm’s length, she pointed a long fingernail into her chest and pressed, screwing the nail into her skin.

“You need to breed, full stop. Right genes, right background. You owe this to our New Italy!” Camilla barked unperturbed. She lifted her arm and rested it around Marco’s shoulders and squeezed.

Her mother was right in a way. Marriage had always been an easy way out: accept Marco’s proposal and escape the interview grind. She could have married him straight away, when the Perfect DNA Fit Lottery had brought them together on their last day of high school. But she had told him she didn’t want a boyfriend. She needed to concentrate on her studies. She had been honest. Probably, she still hoped Otto would return. Who knows? Come back for her like a long-lost warrior who one day would make an entrance exactly at the moment the priest says “speak now or forever hold your peace.”

He, the dutiful son, had waited patiently. When she graduated, rewarding him for his waiting felt like the right thing to do. They dated: dinner permits, clean air breaks, joint oxygen sprints, the lot . . . what couples do to make their heart rate go faster and feel in love, whatever that means. Then, she came up with another excuse. She

needed to get a job before getting married. He waited some more, always dutifully. Now, on the brink of Foreclosure, he had timed his proposal. She couldn't blame him.

It wasn't until she saw the message at her door and felt her heart leap forward at the unspoken possibilities that she realised she had been waiting for Otto all along. Perhaps she used it as an excuse. Perhaps she needed to admit to herself that Otto had nothing to do with it . . . that she fixated on him because it was an easy scapegoat for her indecisiveness. Nothing changed when they met at the Paper Factory, though. He was still elusive like the wind, and her relationship had run its course. She needed to face facts. It was time to break stuff . . . to let go of the past . . . to name things as they were.

"Enough! I've held on to you as my meal ticket, Marco. I've led you on. All I really ever wanted was to have an actual job and to put all those years of study to some use." She held his gaze. "I never loved you," she blurted. She clasped her fists and fought the air between them. The air was heavy with alcohol fumes, with truth and with anger. They had all played a charade of being in love. But it was time to call things what they were. She felt weightless.

"Enough! I am calling your father!" Camilla called out Antonio's name into her platinum wristband. The line was audibly engaged. Camilla insisted.

"Don't bother. He's in a *very* important meeting!" Alida replied, chuffed at seeing the surprise on her mother's face. Always one step ahead of everyone, Camilla did not like being outmanoeuvred.

"I've just seen him, and he's given me his blessing for the new job!" Alida spat the words at her close up. Camilla stared her down, ringed fingers clutching her champagne glass fiercely until it snapped in her hand. Minuscule shards flew through the air. Alida closed her eyes and pulled herself aside. Camilla grabbed a towel and wrapped her hand in it. Blood quickly blotted out through it. Marco helped her up as she

pushed him aside and spat in Alida's direction, like an old lady in an old Italy, cursing her descendants.

"You're going to come begging Marco to marry you, ungrateful little daughter," she hissed, her eyes bulging out of her head. Then, turning to Marco, she snapped, "We're done here!" They both left the kitchen in silence like a retreating army. A scent of brewing anger lingered in the air.

If the Federali had not shown up, would her mother have hurt her? Was she afraid to hurt what was now government property? She was government property. She had to get ready to serve. Alida packed the events of the afternoon in one neat folder and ordered her brain to file them away. There was no time to lose. She stormed upstairs to her room, past leftover cake on the mantelpiece, on armchairs, shelves and on the brim of the lonely champagne fountain. Miranda was going to love getting the red wine stains out of the sheep skin carpets. She went past her mother's room and past the muffled noises of Camilla and Marco talking behind closed doors.

She stepped into her room like a queen taking over her kingdom for the first time. She would say good-bye now to her teenage bedroom. She would look for her own place, make her own life now. She couldn't come back to her parents'—not after what happened with Marco and Camilla. She ordered her mind to focus. Shower, change, same outfit. Crisp, not clammy. Blue hair roots under the hoodie. Report for work. Validate new job. Roots would recede, surely.

Before she left the apartment, she heard her father come in and call Camilla's name. Finally, on her way to get the Sci-Tech job, she had no time to lose by explaining what had happened. His voice lifted profanities to the sky as his expensive shoes got damaged by the shards. She switched on her earpiece and turned it up. Then slammed the door behind her.

Home. Apocalyptic landscape. Something had gone terribly wrong here. Antonio walked tall, light on his feet. He couldn't wait to tell Camilla it was over between them. He was a new man, the man with the Master Plan. Now, he needed a new life.

“Camilla,” he started calling out her name, a knot in his stomach. She still had a hold on him, although he did not want to admit it. Could she be in a good mood, judging by the leftovers of food and alcohol? He had to hope so. He kept calling her name as he reached the kitchen and, thus, didn't hear the Home Brain warn him about the debris on the floor. The glass scratched his expensive leather brogues, the noise as pleasant as nails on a chalkboard. The brim of his silk pants soaked up the alcohol puddle. If he had been unenthusiastic about telling her when he came in, now he was also pissed off—another outfit ruined by her partying.

As the front door slammed shut, he limped into the lobby. He called out Camilla's name, but no one seemed to be there. After all the years living in the shadow of his wife's name and wealth, he could finally be his own man. His Sicilian father, an illegitimate descendent of Garibaldi, as verified by DNA tests, would be proud of him. He puffed out his chest and made for the stairs where Camilla appeared, her hair dripping wet, transparent gown loosely tied at the waist. Although still attractive, she was showing her age, no matter how expensive her clothes were. Youth was priceless. His fresh-faced interns needed no expensive clothes to get his attention.

“Daahling!” She smiled elegantly, he had to admit, revealing her new set of perfectly polished white teeth, paid for with his Citizen score experimental health points.

“So, dearling,” he imitated her, “it looks like you had quite the party.” He motioned in the direction of the lounge, shrugging, indicating his lack of interest in the whole party story.

“You will never believe what happened!” She strutted down the stairs, throwing her hands dramatically up in the air.

Antonio took her in, his wife, ever the aloof actress who made a scene to avoid difficult conversations. He shook his head, not in the mood for detail, blow-by-blow “and then everyone had a really good time, and then they all went home.”

“I organised a small engagement party for Alida and Marco.” She continued unabated, “You know, with her upcoming birthday and all.” She paused and looked at him. He looked away. She continued, her voice pitchy and croaky from the alcohol. “And the little weasel said no to his marriage proposal. Can you believe it?”

“What happened?” His interest was piqued, even if he was aware of what she was doing to him.

“Oh, darling, are you okay?” Her eyes followed his limping, but her voice indicated nothing more than just polite concern.

He waved her away as he sat on the sofa, throwing down all visible leftovers on the floor.

“She got a job! And she said you know about it. You need to stop this!” She motioned toward him with her hand wrapped up in a bandage, towering over him like a first-grade teacher over her class. “You need to call whoever it is you need to call and stop this sham of a job. She needs to marry Marco, have babies, give New Italy the right kind of leaders from the right background with the right genes.”

He glanced at her. He wasn't going to ask what happened to her hand. Even injured, every gesture was poised and self-assured. She was ordering him, bossing him around . . . no inkling that her power over him had evaporated.

“No, I won’t do that,” he said calmly.

She didn’t react. Her silence made him nervous. Her back arched as she poured two glasses of Prosecco. She was still a beautiful woman. She turned around and held one out to him, cupped in her hand like a poisoned chalice. He took it without a word, staring her down, and then drank it in one go. It wasn’t going to be enough to build up the courage to empty his soul to her, so he took the bottle from the table and took a few long swigs from it.

“I am not asking you to do it,” she said with a mildly veiled threat in her tone. “You must do it.”

He took another swig directly from the bottle. Prosecco bubbles escaped his mouth and died down in trickles on his skin.

“First, I am not doing it because I need her in that job,” he said, relishing the look of surprise on Camilla’s face.

“You helped her with this? And you chose profit over the perpetuation of our dynasty?” Her face decomposed from surprise to utter shock. The corners of her mouth were stuck in an awkward shape, a mix of anger and disgust.

“Yes, your daughter will do something useful for New Italy that doesn’t involve her ovaries. Amazing, isn’t it?” He made an effort not to push her over the edge with his words, but he could barely contain it. Her eyes were wide, her mouth half-open and her shoulders slouched. Defeat did not suit her. He took another swig to smooth out any remaining knots in his stomach.

“And second,” preparing his last blow as slowly and precisely as a surgeon prepares his instruments, “I’m not doing it because I’m done taking orders from you. I want a divorce.”

There, he had said it.

“Wait, what?” she raised her shoulders and then dropped them suddenly and exhaled. She held her hands out, pleading with him. “You can’t,” she whispered, a look of despair on her face.

“Oh yes I can, and I will.” He grinned, his lips pressed into a thin thread.

“I’m calling Franco. What is this nonsense?” She pulled her robe around her and tried to pull up the contact list on her platinum wristband.

“Alida has a job, and you want a divorce. The world is coming to an end.” She shook her head, threw her hands in the air, and then whispered softly to herself, “My world.”

“Franco has just agreed to my making him very rich, Camilla. He won’t pick up your call.”

She held out her hand, ready to call. It was shaking noticeably.

“And you know what’s better than old money in the New Italy, my dear? New money.” He relished each sentence . . . daggers into her heart. “I’m new money, and Franco can’t wait to get a piece of the pie.”

If words were made of thunder, they wouldn’t have had such a striking effect on her. Camilla stood in the middle of the room, lifeless, except for tears scrolling down her face. Her face muscles contorted into a puzzle. She looked as if a very expensive carpet had been pulled from under her feet. She kept pushing her chin up, as if trying to unscrew her head. She repeatedly tucked her hair behind her ears. A wounded animal’s eyes were staring back at him.

He bottled up his emotions. There was no need for drama, but he wanted to clear his plate . . . let her know there was no going back.

“I could mudsling our forty years of marriage right now and tell you all the reasons I have to leave you. But I want to start afresh, look at the future and confess that I’m in love,” he said proudly, almost expecting her to be happy for him.

Suddenly, Camilla exploded. Hell has no fury like a woman who has been cheated on. He should have known.

“Wha—? Who is she? Do I know her? Is she one of my friends? I knew it! They are all on the prowl for other women’s men.” Camilla’s cheeks were on fire, and she attempted to throw herself at him, but all she managed was to wobble forward. She was weak and blind with tears.

“You don’t know her! Back off!” he barked.

“Is it one of your intern tramps?” she continued, oblivious to his orders. “Are you banging someone your daughter’s age so you can feel young again?” She pounced towards him, her teeth blindingly white against her red lipstick.

“I would recommend you stop right there!” He pushed her away.

“Don’t you push me. Don’t you dare,” she cried. She paced the room. “Oh dear Lord, it’s one of those insignificant little brainless Barbies that sharpens the proverbial pencils in your office, isn’t it?”

“Dolores has an MBA. She’s not a Barbie,” he said after another swig of Prosecco. He should have known better than to give her details she could chew on.

“Oh Dolores! Even the name makes me puke!” She closed her eyes and started rubbing her temples. “My friends were just saying this morning how the new geishas have multiple degrees and how impotent but horny goats like you get turned on by their Shakespeare soliloquies.” Her tears had dried up. Her hands were balled into fists, her bandage polka-dotted with blood.

“I want a divorce,” he repeated calmly. He wasn’t going to get dragged into his wife’s gossip-infused social analysis. Enough was enough.

There was a long silence, and then Camilla’s voice switched from vinegar to honey.

“But you don’t need a divorce to bang whomever you want, darling,” she said with such light-heartedness that he was almost shocked. Not that he’d needed her permission before to sleep around. But she had never let on that she’d known.

“I want a divorce. It’s over. Let’s be civilised about it,” he pushed back.

They said that one could see one spouse’s true colours only during a divorce. He had little patience for other people’s feelings, least of all for Camilla’s. Always the noble woman who acted properly no matter the circumstances . . . sometimes, he wished she was just a little bit unreasonable. A bit human. Suffer like everyone else for his entertainment. And then, he had important matters to attend to. He wanted to keep this intermezzo brief so he could get on with the more important part of his day. Now that he had the Council of Elders’ approval for his Master Plan, he had to get back to business—the part where he would change New Italy forever.

For Camilla, this was a life-or-death moment, he understood that. But then, everyone was born alone, and everyone had to sort themselves out by the time they reached the end, didn’t they?

“Never. Over my dead body. Never ever!” she kept shouting and moving her hands about as if defending her head from wasps. With her wiry hair reflecting the copper light, she seemed like a lioness roaring. He tuned her out. How embarrassing. He felt she should have a bit of dignity. He had to be firm.

“It’s over.” He didn’t know how else to say it.

“It’s not over till I say it’s over!” Camilla threw herself at him, pounding his shoulders with her fists, perhaps one last attempt to convince him to stay.

But that was the last straw for him. He just had to cut this short.

“Never, ever will you have the divorce. You can’t divorce me!” she hissed through a new wave of tears, her face contorted like a wrung-out towel.

He said nothing, held her and pushed her down in a chair. She plonked down, sobbing. He pulled a list of dates on his wristband and started reading them out.

“Say no to the divorce and I will put an end to your transplants. Your butt cheeks, Labour month 49? Forget it! Your maintenance kneecap change? Labour month 52? Forget it. Your full face and boob lift? Never going to happen!” As he continued reading, she shrunk in the chair and sobbed audibly.

Then, after a while, she started talking softly. “Please leave me my dignity. Please let me ask for the divorce. Allow me to say it to my friends . . . our friends . . . that I want the divorce. The pity, oh the pity!” She fell on her knees, her hands folded in prayer.

He rested his eyes on her—the mother of his child. He was going to be the better person here. He was going to let this one go.

“For Alida, not for you,” he said coldly and then walked out. He left her there, in the middle of the room, a broken woman.

On his way out of the building, he recalled the list of transplants he had just quoted to Camilla, as if reading her rights. He got into his rail zip car and programmed the Gerontocrats’ Palazzo with a stop at the convenience gym round the corner. He bought a fresh supply of nirvana buttons from the corner girl—illegal, surely. But they hit the spot. He popped them in, closed his eyes and programmed the zip rail car carousel to drive around for the time of the tripping spree.

He felt young, but unlike the Juveniles, he had power. And it felt good. He drove around town, watching the ebbs and flows of Juveniles below him, running to and fro. He owned them. He was going to decide who lived or died. They looked like ants, busy dancing to someone else’s tune—his tune. He fumbled with the music channel in the car and stopped the search on a retro tune medley he’d arranged based on his old-time

favourite—Jacques Brel, “*Ne Me Quitte Pas*”. Then, he pressed the accelerator, pressed start and leaned back in his chair comfortably, humming along.

Don’t leave me, youth—don’t leave me. You can’t leave me.

Chapter 7

Stealing past Antonio, Alida slammed the door of her parents' apartment behind her with the force of someone who knew she was never coming back. Her heart was racing out of her chest. The large vein on her neck was throbbing with such force that she could almost hear it in the dead silence that befell the building staircase. She stopped in front of Madame Venchi's door, the centenarian who lived across the landing from Otto's apartment. For a second, she thought the old lady might be positioning herself behind the peephole, ready to come out and ask questions in the name of public order, as she always did.

There were no sounds other than usual creaking of a three-hundred-year-old structure perennially adjusting its footing and the surveillance drones hissing on the ground floor.

She approached the apartment door, two levels down, light on her feet. It had been abandoned since Otto had left, unofficially of course.

With one touch, her earpiece extracted time sequences for her previous meetings. It had been thirty-six hours since she had met him at the Paper Factory. She hesitated, her left foot hovering above the last stair. The urge to walk back up and redo the stairs and land on her right foot was strong. It wouldn't make any difference in reality, but psychologically it would appease her anxiety. Better to have karma on her side than against her. With fingers curled up into fists, she stood in front of his large, oak door with his name hand-carved under the peep-hole.

Would he leave her a message inside? Her gut said yes; her brain said. "Don't be ridiculous."

Had he used this place in all these years at all? Could he have with the drones on the lookout for the deserters?

She hadn't crossed that threshold in ages; it felt odd to do so. Where would she start to look for anything? Maybe it was better to talk to Madame Venchi. She must have known all his movements; she must know when Otto was home last, if at all. Would Madame Venchi even know how much time had elapsed since she had seen him last?

She turned around and sized up Madame Venchi's door: dark wood with the right bottom corner pulp exposed by Clio's scratches, the cat with a million lives and blind as a bat. The doormat was littered with delivery notices and a thick, dusty cobweb stretched across the door like a veil. Her skin prickled. It certainly looked like Madame Venchi had met the time maker himself.

Revolving on her feet, Alida leaned into Otto's door. Her hand stopped mid-air. A taste of bile in her mouth reminded her that she hadn't eaten all day and that she was both thirsty and hungry. She ran her tongue over her lips. They felt chapped. A migraine was wrestling its way to the surface. She rested her forehead against the door and with her fist, she thumped the Beethoven's Destiny rhythm. If he were inside, he'd know it was her. The brass door knocker in the shape of a mermaid lay inches from her nose. She had never used it and wasn't about to start now. With her hands raised above her head, she pounded once more. The door gave in with a sigh, then blasted open as a draft of air sucked her inside.

She stepped forward with her heart in her throat, aware that she was trespassing. How would she explain this if anyone asked? That she had lent Otto some kind of object? His apartment seemed spotless. At least the lounge. A grey sofa lay in the middle of the room, surrounded by screens—some turned off and some humming and hissing, asleep. The walls were dark grey. To her left, there was an overhang between the lounge and the kitchen entrance and a pull-up bar. On her right hand side, where a narrow hall led towards the bedroom and bathroom, a homemade wood-framed

climbing wall was installed, complete with multicolour climbing holds and grips of various shapes.

She stopped in front of the climbing wall and peered closer. Magnesium specks floated in the air. An unattractive hook with rainbow-coloured ropes stood out in the middle of the grey wall. A square polaroid was pinned next to it. Her eyes were drawn to it. Two children stared back at her, big smiles pasted on their faces. Their first day climbing together, just before the Change. Tears welled up in her eyes as she took the polaroid in her hand and swept the magnesium film away. Otto's features were recognisable—hers not so much. She ran her fingers over her lips. That smile, free and careless, was a thing of the past.

Otto's Room Brain heaved into life with a short and sharp siren noise.

“Unknown visitor on the premises. Unknown visitor on the premises.”

She jumped to her feet.

There was a peculiar smell of damp lingering in the air. Stumbling into the kitchen, she discovered the source of the draft. A window was flung open and the flowery curtain fluttered on the outside of the building like a flag. The fresh gusts of wind blowing through the apartment's open windows and doors didn't seem to help refresh the stale air.

If Otto had lived here on a permanent basis, she would have expected to see clothes thrown about, books lying around. At a minimum, half-consumed nutrition capsules or cigarette butts. The Otto she remembered lived in a disorganised, or loosely organised reality, as he liked to call it. What she saw was a sterile environment, reeking of discipline and organisation. No colour, no art on the walls, nothing but minimalist furniture and practical details. There was something too sterile about it, as if combed by a careful forensic hand.

“Turn on the lights,” she tried to imitate Otto’s voice and activate the Central Room Brain. The dark seemed to turn even darker. A shiver crept up her spine. There was a feeling of lifelessness lingering in the air, the same as she felt when looking at Madame Venchi’s door.

Every time she caught a glimpse of her own reflection staring back at her from the wall-mirrors lining the apartment, fear gripped her insides. She could hear her own footsteps in the house, but the delayed echo made her feel there was someone else there. She started making more noise, as if trying to scare away intruders, slamming doors. There was nothing. Everything seemed to be in order. A faint smell of bleach lingered in the air. Dust, huge balls of dust gathered in the corners like wool clouds.

Back in the lounge, she collapsed on the sofa and let her body droop. Her thoughts were running around in her head like a song on loop. It was comforting to be in his surroundings.

She felt his presence in an atemporal way, sat in the same sofa, his body slouched towards the right, always thinking. She wished he had left her a message, some kind of clue of his whereabouts—something that she could focus her mind on. Her hands caressed the fabric of the sofa.

Out of the corner of her eye, Alida spotted a dark shadow that threw itself at her. Before she could react, the shadow had enveloped her head. A sharp pain under her eye shot through her brain. She screamed and jumped to her feet. Her hands, like blades, scissored the air and pushed the shadow away. Her palms covered her face for protection. Then, she slowly brought them in front of her eyes. In the cups of her hands, there were fresh drops of blood.

The shadow lay in front of her, with sparkling eyes fixated on her. An old cat with raised hair on its arched back, claws out and flattened ears.

“Clio, come here,” she kneeled down and reached out to the cat. Clio, Madame Venchi’s cat, withdrew and maxed out the arch of its back.

Her eye was throbbing. The pain under her eye was sharp, as if a blade had just sliced her skin open. Stepping into the kitchen, ignoring the Room Brain trespasser’s laments, she went through the cupboards and drawers with dexterity. Sorting through pre-Change objects felt so familiar. Cutlery that no one used anymore. Wine bottle corks. Ice-cube plastic bags. Discarded bits and bobs that one kept just in case. She found some leftover paper napkins, crumpled at the back of the drawer. They had Father Christmas hand-drawn on them and a handwritten “Happy Fucking Christmas to you, too.” That was more like Otto. Recycling the un-recyclable. Not spotless, not impeccable. She threw them in the bin and washed her face with water. In one of the drawers, she found some cat food. She fed the cat and gave it water. How had Madame Venchi’s cat ended up in Otto’s apartment? It hadn’t moved through the doors by itself, had it?

Alida longed to caress Clio, just to feel Otto’s touch under her fingertips. But Clio never let her get close. The second the cat was done with the food, she snuck away into the bedroom. Otto’s scent was lingering in the air. She tried dialling his number on one of the screens, but the call wouldn’t go through. She tried again and still nothing. And then it hit her. He was gone without a trace. He never intended for her to look for him, otherwise he wouldn’t have made it so difficult for her.

He must have been in this apartment at some point. Rescued wandering Clio. Left her to fend for herself, open windows, hunting ground, safe place to come back to. Maybe he was here one last time before he came to the Paper Factory, knowing that he might leave for good. He had left the window open for Clio.

There was nothing here for her to discover. She shrugged her shoulders. Clio's eyes fixed her from the kitchen, sending shivers up her spine. Sometimes gut feelings are just a sign one needs to eat rather than cosmic signs.

She switched off his screens, an automatic gesture to save energy. How annoying, though. Without Otto, she didn't know how to get on the trail of the Bloody Brigades. She'd be searching in the dark. She'd have to go back to that unpleasant man, Friske, and ask for help. Maybe this was Otto's way of protecting her—if she didn't know anything, she didn't need to keep any secrets. She wouldn't need to lie to cover up for him.

Deep, slow breaths loaded her lungs with oxygen and made her feel light-headed. Everything would surely be all right. She had to hurry. The Federali would be waiting for her downstairs. No need to alert them to anything.

Shuffling her feet towards the door, she heard Clio meow. Two eyes, like dew beads sparkling in the dark, were hovering above the waste bin. No one had bins anymore, she thought. Everyone had in-wall suction and grinder systems. Unless he used it as a vintage decoration, the way people used dial-phones and pharmacy scales to mark an era long gone. But this was part of the whole building overhaul after the Change. Every apartment would have had the new system installed.

She lunged towards the kitchen. Clio didn't give up his throne without a fight. She earned a new scratch on the back of her right hand.

Under the paper napkins she had thrown out, there was another crumpled paper. The origami crane she had given to him at the Paper Factory. Why would he throw away a present from her? Then, she realised he must have come home after the trip to the Paper Factory. He wouldn't have risked it, unless he wanted to leave a trace after their encounter. No one would have looked for him at home, though. Hiding in plain sight. She smiled—that was more like Otto.

Her feverish fingers tried to neaten the origami paper. The colours were fading away. On the blank side, a sentence was scribbled. She lifted the flat paper crane to the ray of light that came through the window and made out Otto's handwriting, "As I walk through the Valley of Shadows of Death, I shall feel no fear, for you are with me."

She choked. Bible verses? Naah. Last thing he would use as source of wisdom. But wait. Maybe there was a different way to look at it: "For you are with me." Was he acknowledging her concern? Was it his way of saying "I know you're thinking of me?" She looked at the note, at every word. It was a carefully written note, some letters bolded. She recognised the shape of the letters from his suicide note. It wasn't so much the Bible verse that drew her attention, although that jarred with everything she knew about him. It was the fact that Valley of Death was bolded more than the other letters. Death. Valley of Death. There was only one, literal meaning that they would both know about. The Valley to the right of the Hornli Ridge, going up the Mount Cervino. This was it, a geo-location for her. She held her breath and then let out a huge sigh of relief.

The writing was fresh, the faint scent of the ink prickling her nostrils. He had come home, just to leave her a sign. If he was on the Cervino, it made sense that his technology was offline. She suddenly felt excited. She had a trail, but the only way she could get close fast was to use government technology. How to do that without getting him in trouble, that was the challenge.

She dialled Friske's number and left him a message. She stayed behind for a few minutes, wiping away all the surfaces that she touched, then met her Federali escorts outside the building and started running.

Chapter 8

Morning clouds swept swiftly across the grey Security Sky. Outside the temperature seemed to have plummeted by the look of runners huddled together, but the colour in the sky was like warm soup for Alida's soul. She tilted her head up. Pattern 245 might just top her favourites as the newest, funkiest art show yet: the right balance of greys and yellows, blue and orange, sharp greens and blood red ribboned into historical portraits—making one stop and pay attention.

The Federali headquarters had a perfect three-hundred-and-sixty-degree view of Cuneo. She stepped away from the ceiling-to-floor windows of the twenty-second floor and moved fast along the hallway like a shadow trying to catch itself. The Headquarters Shard was the tallest building in the middle of the Berlusconi Square, a thorn in the side of the Gerontocrats Palace. She preferred the view from her father's office, but this one was a close second.

The reception area in front of Friske's office was deserted. No one in line, no one manning the communication lines. She pressed a button and a hologram appeared: a close-shaven Civico with a muscular body popped up, an uninterested look on his face.

"I want to see Friske," Alida pronounced slowly but assertively.

"The State is awake, the State is watching you," a background mellow voice permeated the air around her.

The hologram replied in a blank voice, "Stand in line, please," then proceeded to review something on a hologram screen. A hologram in a hologram. Sigh. She missed her work with papers at Il Principe's office.

Alida turned around and looked along the hallway behind her. There was no one in line. There was no one around her.

"Friske, I want to see Friske," she moved closer to the hologram audio extractor fan.

“Have you filled out the online form?” the bored Civico barked, unimpressed.

“Can I speak to a human, please?” This was exasperating. There must be someone alive in this building. No working hours, no public holidays, the new Gerontocrat 24/7 regime, invented to create more jobs. And more satisfied customers. No buttons to push, bells to pull, nothing that would allow her to summon a human. There was movement behind her so she turned around brusquely.

A tiny woman with Asian features cleared her throat. The rose-shaped glasses perched on the tip of her nose trembled like jelly. For all she knew it was the Puzzle Master, the Federali Torturer, so striking was the resemblance. Goosebumps pricked her skin, forming tiny little islands of fear.

“Technology shall not be abused, especially by Juveniles” she tut-tutted, looking her up and down like a market vendor estimating the price of merchandise. Then, pushing Alida to one side, she snapped her fingers at the hologram and asked, “Hey Biscuit, you ok?”

The hologram switched itself off. That look, that empty look. Anyone can tell when technology is rude.

The woman grinned at Alida.

“I’m here to...,” Alida blushed, feeling hot and cold at the same time. Keep your spine straight, imperfection means death.

“I know what you’re here for. Follow me,” said the tamer of holograms.

They both sat in the chairlift to the right side of the reception. The woman keyed in a code, and the chairlift darted directly to one of the wasp-nest offices lining the inside of the Federali building. Room number 5Hx lit up, and the thick glass doors parted. The chairlift spewed Alida on the threshold of the room. Before she could thank the woman, she was gone, zapping across to another wasp nest cubicle on the opposite side of the building.

What happened to thank you and please around here? Since when efficiency had swallowed humanity?

First, she passed through an x-ray scan zone, under a cone of light. Then, a green light came on and the security film barrier lifted. The floor propelled her forward. She landed in front of Friske, so close she could smell his cigarette breath.

“So we meet again.” He sat crossed-legged on the same type of office-in-a-box pillow that she had seen her father use on weekends at home. The trimmings came in handy. A nap accelerator, a nutrition capsule dispenser, a cloud manager, all within reach. Friske’s was more spacious than her father’s and seemed to have more scrolling information screens.

He manoeuvred the floating pillow away from her path.

“Anything I can help you with today?” he asked, absent-mindedly, eyes focused on information scrolling on the side screens.

She hesitated. Her shoulders slouched, her head down, she made her way towards him.

“I need information about the Bloody Brigades. If I am to help you catch them, I need to know what you know.”

She felt sweat beading on her forehead. Her palms were clammy.

Friske stared at her. Despite the beeps and squeaks coming out of the screens, he didn’t get distracted. He jumped from his seat and came next to her and stared at her, his eyes inches from her face. His clothes, layers of freshly conditioned silk became statically attracted to her neoprene suit, as if trying to engulf her. She stepped back.

His face was tilted forward, towards her, his brows furrowed in silent menace. Friske looked up and down at her features, as if evaluating their worth. Another wave of goosebumps swept over her.

“What do you know about the Brigades?”

Her pulse was racing. She scanned her own body from top to toe, trying to control the twitching of her muscles.

“An anti-Gerontocrat movement. Boycott, subversion, desecration, destruction, Juveniles gone rogue,” she spewed the official mantra. Keep looking ahead, fixed point ahead of her eyes.

“Are you or anyone you know involved with the Brigades?” He was so close she could feel spit particles landing on her face. Her knees went weak.

“No,” she said, shaking her head, hiding the shaking of her whole body, like a leaf in the wind.

He was closing in. “Guards,” he called to the Room Brain. Before Alida could open her mouth again, two e-activated body-clamps detached from the Brain and stopped inches from her torso.

“I can feel you’re lying,” he barked.

“Wait, wait,” she held out her arms. “I don’t know anyone yet, but I’m planning to infiltrate them as part of my new job,” she added dutifully. “I need your help.”

His face contorted. Muscles tensed then released, leaving behind crumpled features.

“What do you need?”

“I need to know the codes of all drones in industrial buildings. I need to be trained to pilot them and direct them to the places where I think the Brigades are hiding.”

He checked her credentials. There was a long pause. She could tell he was weighing the risk. His face was impenetrable. A concrete wall. Then, out of the blue, he stepped down and approached her, his hand held out for a hand shake.

“So I’ll be seeing more of you,” he said, with a voice of lead.

She couldn’t speak, her voice minced in her throat by overwhelming anxiety.

“I guess you will,” she tried to sound in control, but her voice betrayed her. She gazed at him. His steel eyes were locked onto hers. She tried to withdraw her hand but couldn’t. “We will be colleagues soon. Together against the Brigades,” she tried to sound joyful.

“Report here first thing in the morning. You will be trained in special recognition. We’re in this together.”

The last sentence fell heavy on her ears.

She gulped. “Am I free to go?” she fought the instinct to run and tried hard to smile.

“Yes,” he reluctantly answered, then snapped, “I’m looking forward to doing business with you, Miss Cuneese.”

Alida’s blood curdled in her veins. A slight nod, military style.

“Now go,” he dismissed her.

She didn’t wait for another invitation and ran as fast as she could. Outside the building, she threw up under the *Portici*. She looked up at the mish-mash Arabesque columns and felt her own body resonate with the recovery architecture. Her muscles were tense like dry ropes.

How to get close to fire without getting burned? How to infiltrate the Bloody Brigades without harming Otto? She could feel the taste of victory. If she took control of all the drones in the buildings, she could help all the Brigades escape along the itinerary that Otto signalled. But how many were there, and would they want her help?

Chapter 9

Marco almost fell into Camilla's arms as he came down the stairs, after attempting in vain to get Alida to reason with him. He was heaving, his eyes wide open, one palm over his mouth. Why would she not listen? She had become so unreasonable all of a sudden.

"What happened? You look like you've seen a ghost," said Camilla, wrapping her protective arm around his shoulders. He could feel her fingers squeeze his skin. He resisted the desire to throw himself in her arms and sob. She smelled nice, of sweet mangoes. His eyes followed her long, white neck as she threw a glance upstairs, towards Alida's room. They could hear the sound of the shower, like a mid-day tropical rain.

Camilla took his hand. He didn't say anything, just followed her without thinking. They reached the living room, deserted now, and she sat him on the sofa. She then brought him a glass of water and locked eyes with him. Her gaze was persistent, as if she was trying to pierce his soul.

He opened his lips as if to say something, then he closed them and shook his head. He had never admitted to himself, but Camilla was beautiful. A bit wilted, but still striking. Remember to breathe.

"Look, I'll talk to her," she whispered. Don't worry about it; we'll figure something out," she dismissed the 'before', the incident of the party with a short hand wave.

She sat down next to him, placed her hand on his hand and squeezed it gently. He continued to shake his head. A thrill ran up his spine.

"I'm sure she'll come around; girls always get cold feet when it comes to marriage," she whispered in his ear. "You know, it's something they always want and then when it's served on a silver platter, they feel like it's not real." She paused and

gazed at him. He gulped. Then, she shook her golden curls, locks caressing her shoulders, “I’ll talk some sense into her, don’t worry,” she reassured him.

“I’ve seen reality enough,” he said, pushing her hand aside. Her skin was soft. Expensive age-preservation creams. He then bit his lips, trying to keep his tone of voice under control.

She got up and fixed him a drink. Apparently she had chosen the most expensive whiskey in the house, as she felt this moment was going to be an important moment.

“Bottoms up,” she said then poured him another glass. “There, there, everything is going to be all right,” she hushed, as she handed him the drink. She held on to the glass, even after he grabbed it. A smile lingered on her face, her eyes fixed on his.

“I’ve—I’ve got to go,” he said, slurring his words. He stumbled to his feet, his head light, his vision blurry.

She pushed him gently down. He put up little resistance, his reflexes mellowed by alcohol.

“Let’s talk about it, shall we?” she opened her arms widely, a glass in her hand, in a power pose that Marco had seen Antonio adopt when he was entertaining guests. She occupied his entire vision. She looked like an Amazon—a powerful, beautiful woman telling him what to do.

He stared at the wall behind her, as if he had seen a ghost. He could hear himself talk, but he wasn’t in control of his words.

“I don’t know who she is anymore,” he said, shaking his head. “Upstairs, there’s this...this creature. I don’t recognise her. She said that she didn’t love me, but it’s not her. I can’t believe her. I don’t know her anymore,” he added, tears rolling down his face.

“Calm down, Marco, everything is going to be all right. Look, let’s establish some ground rules first,” Camilla interrupted him, in a business-like tone. She pushed

him down on the sofa and sat down next to him. He could smell her sweet perfume, inebriating like the sea breeze.

“Ok,” he nodded and bowed his head. All he could think about was when and how he could leave the Cuneese house. Madhouse.

“We both know that the alliance of our families is going to make our dynasties stronger, right?” she asked, pursing her lips, brushing his ear lobe with the tip of her lips.

“Right,” he nodded, coolly.

“Well then, so this is the fundamental premise with which we work,” she established. She jumped to her feet and started pacing the room up and down. He felt dizzy and lay back in the sofa.

“What do you mean?”

Her dress swished, with pure silk waves, mesmerising him. “I mean that whatever my daughter has in her big empty head, I will make her come round. It’s not a deal breaker. We can still go ahead with the wedding as planned and she will agree to it in the end. It’s only sensible that she will,” Camilla added, like a judge of peace.

“You don’t understand—she’s strange, she’s...I don’t think I...” He was shaking his head and stared at the rocks in his whiskey. Then, he emptied his glass and held it out to her for a refill.

“Well, I have the Matrimonial Voucher that you were both supposed to sign tonight. All I need is for you to sign, and I’ll get her to sign later. And there you have it. Our families are finally part of the same alliance.”

Camilla made everything sound simple. He felt drawn to her. A sensible woman who understood what was important in life.

“Mrs Cuneese, I’m not sure I want to go through with it,” he kept shaking his head.

“But you agreed that it’s a wise move,” she handed him a new glass, filled to the brim.

He took a sip, then mumbled, “I don’t think your daughter is the right one for me.” The alcohol burned his entrails. He coughed.

“Nonsense,” she moved her hand towards him dismissively. “She is exactly who she was before—she’s just over-reacting right now. She always does it. She always wants all the attention to herself,” she puffed. “...ever since she was a child. Now that finally something good is happening in her life, she screws it up, as she always has. I won’t let this happen, I simply won’t,” she added, assertively, looking him deep in the eyes.

He stared at the bottom of his glass, as if trying to read his future. The Cuneese women seemed to know what they wanted. A very appealing feature, he had to admit.

“What happens when the Voucher is signed?” he asked, his shoulders slumped.

“I’ll send them off to the registry, and it’s official,” she added quickly.

He pushed himself against the back of the sofa, downed the latest glass of whiskey like tap water, then struck his forehead once. He raised a finger, asking for permission to talk. If he had to put up with a crazy wife in exchange for becoming the most important man of Cuneo, so be it, he thought. It was the right thing to do, surely. And he trusted Camilla.

“Mrs Cuneese, I have something to say,” he slurred, even more intensely now. His cheeks felt numb.

“Go ahead,” she showed her ultra-polished teeth, decorated with a broad cherry-red lipstick smile as she made an elegant gesture, inviting him to speak.

“I agree with your solution,” he blurted out the words, “let’s do this.”

He thought he could decipher relief on Camilla’s face behind the inhumanly broad smile.

“But,” he raised his finger to her, “on one condition.”

“Anything,” she sounded sweeter than he had ever known her. Alarm raised hairs on his neck. It might be dehydration, too.

“I have to protect myself. What if she goes crazy on me again, like she did now? It’s not a pretty sight. I’ll be on my own, with her...and her hysterics. Poor me...” Rule number one in negotiation, Marco recalled his first day at uni: depreciate the merchandise so as to buy it more cheaply. He felt it was only fair to bargain for a better price. After all, Camilla seemed to be keen to get rid of Alida. And his humiliation in front of everyone had to be compensated, surely.

“Oh yes, Marco, poor you,” Camilla added coldly, then sucked the air through her teeth. “Name your price.” The smile was gone.

“I want all of Alida’s dowry upfront,” he held his breath. He was impressed that his business brain still functioned through the alcohol daze.

“You little scoundrel,” she seethed.

“Come on, Mrs Cuneese, what’s a few million between friends?” he grinned. The thought of money made him feel good.

She went to the room next door and brought with her a leather briefcase and a bonds transmitter. She opened the briefcase and revealed a precious heavy fountain-pen studded with diamonds, engraved with the Cuneese family emblem.

She placed it on the table in front of him.

He looked at the Vouchers on her hand screen and started swiping through them. The writing was tight and narrow, like little flies dancing in front of his eyes.

Then, he took the pen in his hand and looked at her.

She held the bonds transmitter in front on him and punched in numbers until he nodded. She then pressed send, and he tapped the screen and signed the Vouchers.

She calmly placed the transmitter on the table and collected the briefcase.

“Marco, a pleasure doing business with you.” Her smile was the brightest and biggest he had ever seen. Blindingly so.

He drank his last shot and watched her wade towards the door.

She turned around and looked at him, her gaze lowered. She closed the door behind her with a demonstrative thud.

He felt grateful to Camilla, but also confused. He was going to be married to Alida, eventually—that’s what she promised. And even if married life was not promising, at least his mind was at ease because of the newly acquired capital. He stumbled towards the exit. He had investments to make. The Gerontocrats Health Bonds were selling like hot cakes. He was going to buy out his entire generation. He wasn’t going to wait until old age before he could get into power. He wanted power now, and soon he could afford to buy it.

Chapter 10

At the Sci-Tech lab, the x-ray machine sanitised all bodies. Going in, her hands felt flaky from the dust in Otto's apartment. Coming out, she felt squeaky, like rubber.

The nurse on duty at the Sci-Tech lab was a petite woman with chocolate skin and soft, white hair. She gave Alida a physical in silence. As she did, Alida looked her up and down: a lean, athletic body in a sterile silicone suit, the epitome of good health. The nurse checked her reflexes, ran her fingers over Alida's veins, tapped them twice and lingered for a moment on her wrist to take her pulse.

"You know, I can't stand the sight of the needle breaking the skin," Alida said, cringing. Perhaps if she addressed her directly, she would get a response.

"Everyone's nervous when they come here, don't worry," the nurse revealed a perfect set of ivory teeth. She sounded strangely empathetic for someone used to extracting stuff from Juveniles' bodies—used to treating them as bodies rather than human beings.

The brightness of the plexi-white walls and the blinding light was diffused through a mesh of little bulbs nested in the ceiling. The light was cold.

Satisfied with the check-up, the woman keyed into the screen on her desk multiple screens codes that Alida couldn't see.

She pushed her down on the chair. Deep breath. The nurse pulled up a drip, connected it to the two elbow locks and wrapped them around both Alida's arms. She clicked both into place.

"You're almost ready for the vaccine," she said. The locks scanned her veins. Fine needles pierced them. The IV bag, hovering over the bed, sighed and started emptying its contents into her body. The nurse moved continuously, her hands on automatic pilot, mixing screens, entering passwords, writing up quick observations

notes. She seemed to waltz around her bed, to a tune that only she could hear. Alida's earpiece was jammed, the noise making her dizzy.

"If it's not the vaccine, then what is in the tube?" she asked, nodding toward the suspended IV bag.

"It's just the base for the vaccine, to relax and smoothly transition you into the next phase of your life," answered the nurse.

The nurse turned to her right screen. Alida could see her own photograph and bio data scrolling.

"So you're here for Clerk 222 Sci-Tech job, right. Lucky you, finding a job so close to Foreclosure," she nodded towards Alida.

The base was starting to work its relaxing magic. Alida's face muscles melted into a smile. Indeed, she counted herself lucky. She just wished she didn't have to go through excruciating physical pain to get there.

"If I were you, I would get married, have children. Not work. After you start working, you will see I'm right," she added.

"I love work." She heard herself slur the words.

"Jobs are not to be loved, that's what people are for." The nurse inserted the coin that Antonio had given Alida into her machine. "So this is where you have uploaded your *raccomandazione* for the job. No passwords, right?"

Alida nodded, lucid but mellow, lulled suddenly by invisible waves. The bed felt like a lonely boat adrift at sea and she was a shipwreck survivor in search of a friendly shore.

Mental barriers were gone. Her thoughts were pressing inside her skull, demanding to be spoken. "What does love feel like?" she asked, but didn't expect an answer. She'd rather the nurse focused on not messing up her application or her dose.

The realisation sent shivers down Alida's spine. She could see from the corner of her eye a black screen filled with white signs scroll quickly instead of her bio data. Then, a red alert sign that froze everything. The nurse kept swiping her wristband. When nothing happened, she gave the screen a gentle slap. Then, the scrolling started again and she said,

“You seem to have some kind of high-level authorisation, but I'm not getting what I need. I will give the machine a minute; it's rebooting now.”

She busied herself around Alida, then sat by her bedside, checking her vitals. The machine seemed jammed.

“I was in love once,” the nurse said, dreamily. Her shoulders dropped. We were young and trespassed a lot. Got taken in as Juvenile convicts. He escaped—left me there. Last I heard, he was a freedom fighter of some sort.”

Alida stared at the ceiling, looking for an anchor, the room swirling around her.

The nurse fell silent. She cleared her throat, then checked the flow from the elbow locks into Alida's veins. She slowed down the flow. The screen kept spewing red flags. She jumped to her feet and started keying in passwords again.

“Your coin is messing up my computer, I can't even get into it now,” she looked agitated.

Then, suddenly, the machine emitted a high-pitched sound and the screen cleared. The nurse was as happy as a child. “All right, we're in. It's downloading your *raccomandazione* now. That seems like an awfully big file,” she said, then pressed enter. A downloading bar appeared in the middle of the screen.

“Did you ever see him again?” asked Alida.

The nurse approached Alida's bed, hesitating to sit down again, monitoring the screen from the corner of her eye. She chose to stand this time, one step away from the screen. Although farther than before, Alida could see her brimming eyes.

“I was in the first batch that tried out the Sci-Tech vaccine. It was the year after the Change. Everyone chucked the Arts out the door and put their money on Sci-Tech. I really didn’t have any choice, as a Juvenile justice convict. So I was a guinea pig.”

“Did it hurt?”

“Oh yes, it did,” the nurse laughed, nervously. “Back then, things were a lot less sophisticated. You see, the vaccine targets the striatum, in particular the ventral striatum, or nucleus accumbens, which is the area in the brain that is involved in attraction and motivational drive. Basically, the vaccine hijacks the area of the brain responsible for self-monitoring and programmes your addiction to Sci-Tech work. You lose interest in other targets of pleasure and you develop compulsive workaholic behaviours. You become a Sci-Tech machine, so to speak,” she stopped abruptly. The downloading bar seemed to reach completion. “The upside is that you’ll smash your pain threshold.”

Alida felt her flesh was coming undone from her bones, like tender meat cooked for a long time.

“My brain hurts. And so does my heart. My chest, anyway.”

“Well so did mine. Things are much better now, believe me. To get rid of pain, you need to go through pain.” Her eyes were still fixed on the download. “Until the new synaptic pathways were formed in my brain and I stopped caring about anything else but my new Sci-Tech career. It’s like riding a bike now. You don’t miss anything from your old life.”

“So the vaccine made you a loveless workaholic?” Did she really say that? Disinhibition was obviously a serious side-effect.

“Pretty much.” The nurse confirmed. Maybe she was used to patients saying terrible things. “Hmm, there’s something wrong with your *raccomandazione*,” she looked at Alida, quizzically.

“I don’t want to become a loveless workaholic, too.” She heard herself whimpering. “I’ve changed my mind. I don’t want the vaccine.” Now she was trying to pull at her elbow locks. She felt the liquid burning her veins. She winced. Deep breath, open eyes wide.

“Your *raccomandazione* is not getting through.” The nurse was repeating herself. “There’s a bunch of encrypted data here. It says high-level authorisation required. My computer can’t read this stuff.” She extracted the coin and put it back into Alida’s palm.

“That’s perfect, then. I can go home.” Alida spoke through a haze of thoughts.

“You can’t leave. You’re in the system now. Sit back,” she pushed Alida’s shoulders firmly to the backrest and reached for the drip base dose. The relaxation flow hit Alida’s system instantly.

“I am Antonio Cuneese’s daughter,” she managed to mumble before her tongue became heavy and her lips stopped following orders.

“Of course you are,” the nurse said and started to key in information again.

“Everyone knows my father.” Alida felt herself drooling as she spoke.

“And so does my computer, you’ll be glad to know! So you’re Antonio Cuneese’s daughter, that’s a check. He was supposed to give you the *raccomandazione*, which we can’t download properly for some reason. But the system’s jammed, too many new cases being processed.” She muttered to herself as the screen changed. “Now let’s see the Employment database.” She was focusing on her right screen. “Ok, and that’s a check with the Cultural Heritage Division. I can see your name with the Sci-Tech job pending. Ok, we’re good to go. All clear.”

The dispensing unit spat out an Epipen tube with fluorescent liquid.

“Just close your eyes and breathe normally,” she told Alida, approaching her. “You need to let the vaccine get absorbed quickly. If you’re upset, the blood pressure will make things difficult.”

“I’m not upset,” said Alida, “I just changed my mind. Don’t want to do this anymore.”

“Are you afraid of the pain? I promise it will be fast and you won’t even remember it once it’s done.” The nurse sat next to her again. She looked stern, but had a spark in her eyes, just a small glimmer of hope that Alida held onto. “The vaccine is supposed to numb your hand and then make you fall asleep for a couple of hours,” the woman said, touching her forearm gently.

Alida’s muscles tensed. She could feel her blood boiling.

She could see the nurse put drops in her eyes. Her face went numb in seconds. The Epipen moved in slow motion and delivered the intravitreal vaccination. The entry point of the needle was scorching her retina. Her eyeballs were made of fire. Her tongue was tied.

“I will turn down the temperature in the room and give you a freeze blanket to keep your body temperature constant,” said the nurse, checking her vitals again. Click, click, all done. Then, she was gone.

Alida’s mind was on high alert, unlike her limp body, which was itching all over. Her throat was dry, a coughing building slowly inside, threatening to choke her. Her eyes bulged, tears welled up, then receded. There were none left that her body could spare. She could feel her temperature soaring.

The last time she had felt that feverish was when she was in primary school and Antonio had rushed her to the emergency room in the middle of the night. She had laid in bed for days. No one knew what was wrong. He had stayed by her side, praying that she would be ok. Camilla was in and out, what with her hairdressing appointments and

girlfriends' dramas to sort out. And then she came to, as mysteriously as she had been taken ill. Antonio was praying, and he swore her healing was a miracle.

Her fingers were swollen, her clothes drenched. She tried pulling at the tubes under her skin, but they wouldn't budge. She started screaming, but the sound of her voice died down as it hit the soundproof walls.

Her brain felt like it was roasting. She tensed every cell in her body trying to fight the vaccine.

She opened her eyes and looked at the ceiling, imagining herself to be a planet rotating round the sun.

My bed is not supposed to move, but I'm moving, I'm floating, I'm a little bird, a little fish and my room is my sky, my sea, my freedom, thought Alida, her eyes moving, her hands raised to her temples, trying to keep her head still looking at the ceiling of her bedroom.

She felt like a boat without a skipper on a rough sea. As she was trying to find balance, in the midst of coming to grips with her vertigo, she heard a roaring noise outside her room, like the beginning of a storm.

In that moment, she felt so acutely aware that her body was trying to expel the vaccine, like a foreign body infiltrating in her veins. She opened her eyes and mouth widely, like a mad woman breathing out a ghost.

Then, her stomach contracted and the cramps came in waves. She started retching. Nothing came out since she hadn't had food in her stomach since the previous day. She realised only now that she was hungry. And very, very thirsty. But her stomach wouldn't let up and started pushing a nauseous taste in her mouth. She felt like her insides were going to come out through her throat. She brought her knees up to her chin. She pushed herself to one side and started vomiting. Some liquid, streaked dark yellow and bright green, splashed onto her chin and chest and then on the white sheets.

The IV bag was almost empty. She prayed the process would finish soon. What was an inoffensive liquid in the beginning, combined with the vaccine, sent her body into a freefall off a cliff. She continued to vomit and found a semi-comfortable position that allowed her to control the cramps and the vomiting at regular intervals. She felt her body wringing itself out like wet laundry.

Her eyes remained fixated on the drip. Every drop resonated in her gut. Her eyelids became heavy.

She could feel the poison try to take over her limbic system to numb her feelings and re-wire her cortex. This must be what a marathon runner must feel, at the end of the race: exhausted and elated, low in physical capacity but high in spirit. But now, back to square one. The chemical ordeal had left her weak and empty. Her eyes scanned the room. No sign of the nurse. She could only hope it would deliver what it promised. No more pain and a bit of Sci-Tech edge.

She would be happy with some of that. But now, she had to get out of there. Time to get to work.

Chapter 11

It had been forty hours since she had seen Otto — since her life had been sucked into the Foreclosure vortex. Forty hours, one whole day. Before the Change, this would have been the dawn of St George's day, Otto's birthday, and here she was, waiting in the lounge outside Friske's office. Was Otto celebrating his day? It was illegal to mark the saints' days now. So maybe he was.

An escorting Fed was going to be with her shortly, she had been told, to take her to the Special Forces training ground. She felt she had just woken up from a strange dream. Her newly acquired position of Industrial Building Tester was suddenly starting to feel very real.

The roof of her mouth was dry. She craved a sip of re-hydration broth to rebalance the minerals in her body. The muscles in her right calf tensed in a spasm. The pain made her bite her lips and flinch. She limped the length of the corridor and opened the door that gave on to a small balcony. Keeping an eye out for any movement in the corridor, she breathed in Cuneo. Across the city, there were flickering lights, like fireflies at dusk.

How did people get anything done in twenty-four-hour day before the Change? And eight hours of sleep — what a luxury. In all honesty, Alida rather preferred the weekend lie-ins, and sleeping to her heart's desire. That's why she protested when the Change managers put her generation through the Time Rationalisation re-wiring. She had picketed the Time Ministry with a not-yet-pro-Gerontocracy Marco and all the others. She had tried to ditch her meds. She had shouted and screamed and held out the longest while everyone else started following the new forty-hour-day schedule. The Security Sky made the sun rise on time. Of course, when you start working for the Government of New Italy, like Marco did, you don't really have a choice.

But then, the Sky Pattern started changing every five hours, signalling a new run-work commute and the Soothing to Sleep Sky Pattern started flashing for five hours, lulling everyone to sleep. The AttentionSpan capsules were regulated to the same timeframe. Fighting against them made her feel permanently jet-lagged. In the end, she decided she was being silly. Seven five-hour work or study shifts, one five-hour sleep shift. Seven work or study shifts, one sleep shift. It became second nature after a while.

Her health band buzzed. Simultaneously, her earpiece announced the end of the five-hour sleep shift. Within minutes, the streets of Cuneo were going to turn from desolate to buzzing. Her eyes swept over the rooftops one last time, then lingered on the mist-draped crown of Mount Cervino, when she heard someone expel air impatiently behind her.

She turned around and quickly nodded to acknowledge the Fed's presence. His towering, muscled body made her feel as fragile as a twig. He was twice her size, in both height and weight, and his eyes were hidden behind opaque glasses. His fully tattooed head skin told a story of a previous life in the Border Guards. All the veterans used tattoos to conceal battle wounds. This cushy job was probably a promotion for some kind of act of valour in the Killing Fields frontline, she thought, as she took in his bull-like neck and shoulders. At his silent order she squeezed past him and he then shepherded her along the corridor, one heavy hand resting on her quivering shoulder, guiding her towards the chairlift.

He key-locked both their seat buckles then scanned his retina into the chairlift reader. There was a short waiting time then the chairlift plunged downwards at a speed that made Alida's heart jump into her mouth. Her earpiece was down — again. This seemed to be the norm in the Federali building and thus she couldn't programme any relaxing music, which made her even more anxious. Her hair was on end, her senses alert. Their chairlift plunged through the ground floor level, which had opened up

seconds before they reached it, causing Alida to scream in fear, then look away, embarrassed, as they descended further underground.

Before she knew it, her ears popped and she opened and closed her mouth like a fish out of water — but to no avail. She was temporarily deaf. When the chairlift came to a stop, she was thankful for a second then felt overwhelmed with the feeling of being buried alive.

Without a word, the Fed unceremoniously unbuckled her, pushed her out of the chairlift then shot back upwards, leaving her alone in a pitch dark place. She extended her arms, falling forwards. Her joints almost snapped under the weight of her body. It was humid and the air smelled salty. She dared not move, afraid she was on the brink of a precipice and any movement would send her down into the abyss. It was like balancing on her toes on mountain ridges while thinking about where to push her body next. The best thing to do was to stand still and focus on her breathing.

Suddenly, the lights went on, displaying a narrow corridor and flashing arrows pointing away from her. A hollow voice trickled from the ceiling, commanding her to run in the direction of the arrows. She obeyed, and soon found herself in a huge football field bathed in powerful white light.

Blink. It was an enclosed space, a square area carpeted with fake grass, with boundaries made of huge walls and ceilings, the colour of dirty salt. Harnesses, ropes and other equipment hung from the walls, delineating a colour-coded climbing circuit. The air was heavy with dust and sports chalk. Fake Gothic arches met at the top, protruding veins on the parchment texture of the ceiling. At the far end of the field, a group of perhaps twenty Juveniles, men and women, were gathered around what seemed to be a woman commander in Fed uniform.

Alida sprinted towards them without thinking twice, when she heard her name.

“You’re late, move your arse now,” thundered the Fed.

The group of Juveniles stood at attention and parted ways to let her pass. Out of breath, ears un-popping painfully, Alida halted in front of the Fed. Her eyes were still playing up, struggling to adjust to the bright light.

What were you supposed to say in this situation? She tried to sound professional, whatever that meant. The only things she could recall about Special Forces came from pre-Change Hollywood movies. She was bound to sound ridiculous.

“Reporting for duty. Special Forces duty,” she managed, trying to steady herself. Then she was going to add “my name is,” but the Fed said it, stopping Alida in her tracks. The woman’s voice sent shivers down her spine.

“Alida Cuneese, tut-tut. We meet again.”

The ice-cold voice sounded familiar. So did the ivy and vanilla scent. The perfume! The memory of the pint-sized Asian woman, the ChemFed, suddenly came to her.

Squinting and re-focusing her eyes did not help. A part of her brain was still blurry. Extracting information. Slowly. Rubbing her forehead. And then, it all flashed before her eyes. First like a swarm of fireflies, dotting the back of her eye-lids, then a fully formed memory. The Chem supervision at the Feds’ headquarters after her meeting with Otto. Alida shook her head, surprise writ large on her flushed cheeks.

“Aren’t you the Chief Chemo-Psychologist? What... What are you doing here?” Alida asked, then stepped backwards, towards the Juveniles. This was not good news. She flicked her hair backwards and scanned their faces quickly. Hostile eyes, shooting daggers at her. Or maybe at the woman.

The ChemFed sneered, her mouth set unkindly. She seemed pleased with the jolt to Alida’s memory and the impression this had made on the Juveniles in attendance.

“I’m here to kick your sorry arses into Special Forces shape,” she barked.

Alida instinctively straightened her back and frowned. Heels clicked together behind her.

“You were late! You are always late,” the woman spat in her direction.

“I...” attempted Alida. The time to have an opinion was probably over so she bit her tongue, too late though.

“You were even late for your interview,” she shouted, so close to her face, that Alida could feel her poisonous ivy breath.

A surprised sigh swept through the crowd at the ChemFed’s words. Alida bowed her head.

The ChemFed paced up and down in front of Alida, then swiftly extracted a leather riding crop from her waist. With a controlled flick of the wrist she hit the back of Alida’s knees.

Breath. Taken. Away. Scream. Swallowed. The thin end of the crop caused an explosion of pain as it made contact with the thin polyester of her uniform. Half raw with pain and half mortified with the shame of being made an example of in public, Alida swallowed hot tears welling up in her throat.

“Squat. Now!” the ChemFed’s words mixed with spit descended upon her flushed face like hail.

Back straight. Knees above feet. Alida lowered herself, as if sitting on a chair. Hands on waist. Eyes straight ahead. Push down, pull up through your crown. Hamstrings begging for mercy. After fifty moves, she felt as though her liver were about to explode.

“Faster, faster, I can’t see you sweat!” she kept barking, while the Juveniles behind her giggled.

Her armpits were drenched, her upper lip dotted with salt. Bastards. The lot of them. Heartless bastards.

“Squat, squat,” the ChemFed ordered, her body a mass of pure muscle fibre. The only possible way to have that polished body was through daily, gruesome exercise.

Alida felt dizzy. She had lost count of the squats. Her legs were giving in under her, every rise sending shooting pain through her thighs. She clenched her fists so she wouldn't let the tears come out.

“Fifty, fifty-one.... faster, faster. Let me help,” Standing next to Alida, she used two fingers, firm on her collarbone, to push down. The weight of the ChemFed's body, projected down through her fingers felt like a sack of stones. The woman's head was disproportionate to her body. Then she took a break from helping, to bark to the Juvenile on Alida's right,

“What are you looking at?”

Alida checked her peripheral vision, expecting to see a Juvenile trembling like a leaf. A girl with white-blonde hair, a sprinkling of freckles on her cheeks and a string of piercings in her eyebrows smiling at the ChemFed defiantly, while chewing gum.

“Enough,” the ChemFed whipped in Alida's direction then swung the rod at the white-blonde girl.

“You — two hundred squats! And if you as much as wince, you get detention. Go!”

Off the hook, Alida collapsed on the floor, panting. She rolled on her back, brought her knees to her chest and rocked from side to side, comforting herself. When her breathing calmed down, she turned her head to watch the white-blonde girl carry on squatting with a smile on her face, loudly chewing gum. She made it look easy. Joyful, even.

What a brave girl. Chewing gum in the face of authority. Or a show off, she couldn't decide. Anyhow, that Chemical bitch deserves to meet her match. Alida caught herself rooting for the Gum Chewer.

You know it's time for a fitness talk when you have a million drums beating inside your skull and a million tiny little thoughts tap-dancing on your nerves. Alida picked herself up and brushed off her clothes. She stretched slowly, like a Gerontocrat on a mid-day gym break, lactic acid shooting pins throughout her body.

Was she kidding? Better acquire strength fitness through meds and hypno work, just like everyone else. Who needs this crazy lactic bath burning holes through one's veins?

"You're going to sweat your way to become the strongest Special Forces Juveniles Kill Squad, DO — YOU — HEAR ME?" the pint-sized Fed contorted her face in a warrior scream, her hands planted firmly on her hips.

Alida retreated among the other Juveniles, in the front row, in between the Chewer and a rather fetching young man who clamped his hands on his ears demonstratively.

She giggled. The ChemFed must have swallowed a megaphone. No human can emit those decibels, surely.

"Yes, Maaaadam," the Juveniles sang in one voice, lethargically.

"Four hundred push ups. All of you! Now," the ChemFed whipped her rod in the air and everyone dropped to the floor.

Ugh. The bitch. Foreclosure didn't sound like a bad alternative at that particular moment.

"I don't think I can do this," Alida exhaled towards her right.

The Chewer had her eyes fixed on the floor and counted out loud. She was already into her fiftieth push up while Alida was still considering whether she would go down for the twentieth. There was no coming back from that plunge, she could feel it.

She tried to whine towards the hunk on her left. Oh dear Lord, trying to look attractive while doing push-ups was exhausting. She could feel her mother-fucking

forehead vein pulsing fit to burst and her face sweltering red like steak on a grill. She gave up. Her back was trembling, her arms refusing to flex. She was going to be sick. She was going to pass out. She couldn't see anything for the sweat streaming into her eyes.

Bless the inventor of the number four hundred. Bless them. May the glory be to them and accrue to their heirs. When the glorious number four hundred was called out loud — most likely by the badass Chewer — she couldn't tell anymore. Alida fell to the ground like a dead woman.

“Diss-missed! I want you to load up on energy capsules and report back in five,” the ChemFed barked her last order in their direction. “I want you ready for the Trials,” she added, slicing the air with the whip. The first row of Juveniles, sweaty and panting, withdrew instinctively. Nobody uttered a word.

Alida closed her eyes. She felt a squeeze between her collarbone and the back of her neck, the unfriendly kind, painful. When she opened her eyes, the white-blonde, freckled girl was staring down at her.

“Stop being such a princess,” the Chewer pulled her up to her feet, “You need to come with us.”

“I'm sorry, do I know you?” Alida pushed her away.

“Yeah, we've got work to do,” the Chewer ignored her.

Badass and Nasty, Alida decided.

“And why exactly should I listen to you, no-name girl?” Alida planted her feet apart and clenched her fists, like a child in the playground ready to defend its toys.

“Listen, princess, we have no time for games.” The young woman was standing too close, in her face, invading her private space, without any sign of reverence. Alida looked around and noticed the hunk was standing next to them, looking on. The others had gone. The hall seemed all of a sudden huge and stuffy.

“We’ve got four minutes to whip you into shape, if you pardon the pun,” she said, revealing a set of ivory teeth, perfectly shaped.

“You don’t load up on energy capsules, you die. Simple as that.” The guy’s voice was matter-of-fact. None of the patronising tone the girls used.

The white-blond’s head was tilted backwards, expectantly, a triumphant smirk on her face. Thick black eye-liner shaped her gaze, making her brow piercings stand out even more.

If there was something Alida was sure of, it was that she was nowhere near the concept of ‘in shape’. Yeah, she could run. Yeah, she could climb. But this strength building stuff? Naah. She felt even more self-aware looking at the two of them. Even at a cursory glance, they both looked like fitness gods.

He was medium built with fine proportions and an elegant posture. His jaw had a clean line, such a great bone structure. Eyelashes as long as butterfly wings.

Must not lose myself in his eyes. She sighed, “Ok, let’s go get energised,” she said, heading merrily towards the sliding door through which everyone else had left the hall.

The Chewer had a point, but it sounded so much better when the Fitness God said it. Alida looked back over her shoulder, expecting him to measure her up and down, so she straightened her back and tried walking in-line to make her hips sway. He was deep in conversation with the Chewer though.

The small side room that doubled as cafeteria was filled with capsule slot machines. She looked around, at the Juveniles’ ecstatic faces — some lying on the floor, some leaning against the walls — all sucking capsules, discarding them, picking up others with clean, repetitive motions. Someone had won the jackpot and couldn’t quite consume all the capsules at the rate they were popping out of the machine. Off to one side there were large signs indicating the way to the changing rooms and the lockers.

Alida thought it might be a good idea to change. At least get a pair of new shoes. Instead, she chose to stay and stuff her face with as many capsules as she could. Her tongue lit up bright pink from the beetroot power shots, her favourite natural kick. The Chewer went for berry powder and the Lord of Fitness for maca root.

Most Juveniles preferred to get the nutrients as powders and rub them in their gums to get an instant high, but she preferred the liquid version. It made her feel adult. Another shot of beetroot on the rocks, please. One down, many more to go.

“So what’s your story?” Alida turned to the Chewer, after drinking her fifth capsule and feeling restored.

“My name is Clarissa, PhD in BioChem and this is Proctor, Masters in Mechanical Engineering and Architecture,” she said, motioning towards Prince Charming with a handful of discarded capsules. She then dropped them demonstratively to the floor.

“What are you doing?” recoiled Alida.

“Oh don’t worry, princess — they are water soluble. After we’re done pigging out here, they’ll wash everything away,” she added, spitting berry seeds and wiping her mouth with the back of her hand.

If being called a princess annoyed Alida, she was beginning to think that compared to the Chewer, she deserved the royal title, at least in terms of manners. She turned her nose up and asked the young man, who was leaning against a wall, his arms folded across his chest.

“How come you guys are here?”

“I’m a victim of my own success,” the Chewer said, with a dramatic head-shake.

Alida’s eyes widened. There was a loud bell sound coming from the Room Brain system and the countdown to return to the training hall began. The other Juveniles

started making their way back. Alida, Proctor and Clarissa were thrust closer by the moving crowd.

“I was messing about one day in the lab. Honest to God I was trying to reverse the death of melanocytes, you know to stop hair from turning grey,” the Chewer explained, any sign of banter erased from her face.

They were moving now across the field at a brisk pace. Other Juveniles were passing them by, jogging lightly.

“Tested my theory on myself,” she added, pointed at her hair, “and managed to turn off the goddam TYR gene. So now I’m turning albino, have shit vision and I was accused of trying to turn off the Blue Hair gene,” she chuckled.

The face of the Blue Hair chased down *il Ponte dei Suicidi* by the Feds popped into Alida’s memory, giving her a sudden rush of goosebumps.

“So why are you in the Special Forces? Isn’t this some kind of honour?” Alida tried to hide a streak of worry in her voice.

There was a pause, an exchange of looks between Clarissa and Proctor, then he answered: “The likelihood of all of us dying is very high, but if we refuse, we seem unpatriotic. You know, it’s a poisoned chalice.”

He was such a doomsayer, Alida decided. Yeah, they’re all going to die. At some point.

They had reached the arena again and people were lining up. This time they stayed at the back of the group, waiting for the ChemFed to appear. The bell was tolling, as if a funeral had taken place or was about to.

“So I gather you volunteered for this?” Alida whispered in his direction.

“Oh no. They caught me putting an IED under the flaming Good Wall. God, I hate that thing. If I never seen another Botticelli in my life, it’ll be too soon.”

Alida gasped. Suddenly he wasn’t so hot. They could never be together, clearly.

“This is my parole. I fuck it up, I get life — simple as that,” he added.

Was she the only one with an actual job to do? Her chest puffed up as she stood straighter. Whatever happened in these trials, she’d surely get some kind of commanding position, regardless of how much the ChemFed hated her. Surely.

Speaking of the Devil, Her Darkness had floated out in front of them in an office-in-a-box. Compared to her father’s device Alida noticed this one was fitted with only one screen to the ChemFed’s right-hand side. The overall design was much simpler, minimalist but clearly a newer version with slicker controls.

She stepped out of the floating box and stood in front of them, with a powerful presence despite her size. Her stare lingered on each of the Juveniles’ faces, silently reprimanding them, until there were no more whispers or noises. Everyone had frozen under her gaze, as if she were the Medusa of Greek mythology.

“Nine hundred and ninety-nine victims yesterday morning,” she began, projecting her voice all the way to the back, where Alida stood. “Nearly fifty thousand since The Change . . . all claimed by the Bloody Brigades.” She paused. Then added, “This is the enemy.”

Alida remembered the East Wing and Piazza della Stazione explosions. And the contradictory messages that came through when she was on the way to see her father. The Gerontocrats channel had been telling her to go home while the Federali kept ordering her on. That moment when she managed to over-ride the Gerontocrats’ command through sheer willpower was stuck in her mind. Then she recalled her father was concerned that she had been out on the street and had urged her to go home. She hadn’t really been that bothered about the whole Bloody Brigades drama, if she reflected on it. When explosions happen all the time, they sort of become part of the scenery, part of life’s soundtrack. Before you know it, everyone starts living with a ‘whatever’ attitude.

Fifty thousand victims. That was a chilling wake-up call.

“You are here for different reasons. And,” she paused for dramatic effect, “you all have different gifts.” She paced up and down the length of the group, laid out in a five-by-five formation.

“But all of you are called by the Government of New Italy to be part of its elite unit, the Special Forces,” she blasted. “And stamp out the Bloody Brigades once and for all,” she shouted.

“Each of you is gifted, and each of you has a weakness,” she changed pace and tone, so that all ears perked up. “My job is to make you tougher, to make you forget what you’re not good at and show you how to survive under duress,” she added, opening the control screen of the office-in-a-box. She keyed in a code which started a shadow projection behind her.

Alida’s muscles felt like tense rods, painful every time she tried to flex them. She felt they were going to snap if she as much as sneezed. She wasn’t looking forward to another round of squats or push-ups.

“You will all go through three virtual reality scenarios that will test you on your fighting skills against simulations derived from actual operations against the Bloody Brigades. We will check-in at the end of each scenario to see what you’ve learned.” She keyed in the command as if they were going to take a walk in a park.

A wave of unease swept over the group. By the time it got to Alida, it was palpable anxiety. She exhaled forcefully, wiping fresh sweat from her eyebrow and stole an inquisitive look, first to her right and then left. Both Clarissa and Proctor were looking straight ahead, no sign of preoccupation on their faces.

They were asked to raise their right hands in the air, exposing their tattooed wrists. The ChemFed beamed the VR instructions towards the group. They waited for a moment, waiting for the instructions to load. Then each of them found a comfortable

position to sit in, waiting for the first scenario to kick in. Most sat on the floor, cross-legged and docile.

Alida stood tall, ready to fight. Ready to run. She closed her eyes. A long buzz followed, signalling to all the beginning of the first VR experience. Her brain immersed itself in a surround-system. When she opened her eyes, she was at the end of *il Ponte dei Suicidi*, just outside the Industrial Area.

Hectares of rusty steel chimneys and abandoned factories lay ahead of her. She could make out the vent from the Paper Factory to the right, the one of the Tanning factory just behind, then a series of smaller funnels towards the far end, on the left-hand side. She began walking towards the left, away from the Paper factory, drones buzzing above head. The first thought she had was that everything seemed very real.

The Security Sky was a bit less bright than usual, but then she checked her health band to verify the pattern. Her wristband was back online and took a second to sync updates. There, it showed the Sky Pattern to be a fresh pastel exercise celebrating the Venetian Rosalba Carriera's work distinguished by its Rococo style with soft edges and fluted shapes. Pattern #22, definitely a new favourite.

The path she was following was mostly hidden by overgrowth so she had to push herself through shrubs and bushes. In a clear spot among the rubble, Alida took in the humid air. She perked her ears and looked around her. There was no movement that her eyes could pick up and no sounds besides the chirp of crickets.

Suddenly, out of nowhere, a woman with a baby clutched to her breast charged towards her. She looked dishevelled and, dirty with rags hanging on her tiny frame instead of clothes. Alida froze, her feet planted firmly on the ground.

The wailing got louder as the woman approached. Alida's ear detected distant laments and cries for help. Her eyes picked up movement in a nearby barn. A number of drones buzzed above head, like a swarm of wasps.

The woman was now in front of her, a few metres away. Alida kept her at arm's distance. She found she had a stun gun and had instinctively had pulled it out and pointed it at the woman, ready to fire.

The woman's hair was long and twisted into dreadlocks. Her delicate features were wrung in a painful expression. She stepped back when she saw the gun. Her front teeth were missing and her scrawny infant, strapped to her body in a knotted cloth, seemed as if it was sucking the last nutrients out of her malnourished body.

A few more children emerged from the barn, crying for their mother. They had outgrown their rags and moved about shamelessly, half-naked.

This was an image not dissimilar to life in some lost tribe in the Amazon she had learned in school. She was shocked to see this just outside Cuneo. In New Italy.

Against her better judgement, Alida tried to push past the woman and reach the children, following her gut instinct to help them. With feline movements, the woman threw the baby to one side and shoved an elbow into Alida's ribs, throwing her off-balance. Alida lost her foothold and plunged forward. The infant, she saw in her peripheral vision, had bounced when it hit the ground. A rubber prosthetic. She tasted blood in her mouth, her upper lip had been split. The woman exploded into a cartwheel, like a gymnast, then landed close to Alida and hissed in her ear, "You're dead."

Alida jabbed the stun gun in the woman's ribs and pulsed a few times. She felt the short, sharp stings that followed, transmitted through the woman's iron grip which tightened on her upper arm.

With a short, calculated move, she threw Alida to the ground, put her foot on her neck and pressed down. She emitted a strange noise and called others to come out of the barn. Alida managed to turn her head to one side and get one last glance at the woman's face. She looked like a character from the old manga comics. Economical, precise movements. Fierce and yet strangely magnetic.

She should have known better than to approach her.

Then GAME OVER pulsed across Alida's shut eyelids and she opened her eyes.

"You had a clean shot and you hesitated," the ChemFed barked in Alida's ear, startling her.

"She had a baby. I've never shot a gun before," Alida confessed.

"You are the roukiest roukie I've ever seen," the Chief Torturer spat at her with disgust. "And you shot her while you were in contact. Stings a bit, does it? You won't get full movement back now for half an hour, maybe more. Don't ever use the stun gun on an opponent who's touching you. You'll feel paralysed for a while but in a real life situation you'd be dead."

Relief.

Alida placed a hand on her ribs, then on her arm where the woman had gripped her. She felt a mild discomfort but nothing more. She could move freely, wiggle her fingers. How come the electroshock hadn't discharged through her body? She was thankful for it and decided to act more injured than she really felt, not to arouse suspicion in the Devil Herself. She lowered herself to the ground and sat cross-legged, waiting for the ChemFed to finish with the first inspection and start the second VR scenario.

She needed to focus. What was going to happen to her if she didn't make it into the Special Forces? If she lost the Building Inspector job, she would be back on the Foreclosure list. Now less than a week from her birthday. She closed her eyes.

The second simulation began. At the beginning, she could detect no motion, no sound, no smell. She was back in the Industrial Area. She listened intently, trying to detect crying babies or women's laments. She wasn't going to fall into the same trap twice.

This time, she held her gun out with both hands, in plain sight.

The path ahead led to an abandoned brick factory. There were piles of bricks everywhere, like Lego pieces, but ivy had grown over everything, making strange shapes, creating post-modern sculptures. From the entrance of the building, the inside seemed strangely hollow. Cleanly swept. She took a step back and decided to inspect the building from the outside.

As she advanced towards the back of the building, she noticed thick smoke coming out of third-floor windows, flames lapping the window frame. Various objects flew through the air, cutting off her path. As she turned around, she noticed more objects being thrown out of another window, blocking her way back. She was trapped between two piles of debris. Coughing. Lungs filling up with smoke. The only way out was through the undergrowth. She zipped her top up and looked at her bare hands, wishing she had brought gloves with her. She secured her gun behind her back, crouched and started making her way away from the building, using her elbows to push aside the branches.

Then she heard his voice. Freeze. She wiped off her brow and arched her body. A distant voice calling her name. Her arms reached out first, her palms carefully checking the path ahead then she turned towards the building. An overwhelming sense of relief bathed her senses. There was Otto, framed by one window, a hand raised, waving at her. So – had they picked him for the simulation to test her loyalty? But her mission was to befriend him, infiltrate the Brigades. The fire raging behind him seemed as if it would engulf him at any moment. Her instinct told her to get away, but her heart pulled her back.

“Why can’t you climb down?” she shouted at him, gasping, cupping both her hands around her mouth.

“A beam has fallen on my feet, I can’t move — I need you to come help me down,” he said, in his purest ‘I’m asking for help, but’ Otto voice. Whoever

programmed this had done a great job. He had this way of sounding like he was doing the other person a favour by asking. He motioned towards the entrance door, but she didn't trust the structure of the building. The fire lapping at the beams had likely weakened them, but the walls were still sound. Without hesitation, she ran towards the building, grabbed hold of a downpipe and climbed up to the first floor where she hung from the window sill. Her hands were covered in thorn cuts. The heat of the fire inside had increased the temperature of the walls. She could barely touch the bricks without feeling blisters forming on her palms.

“Hold on, I'm coming,” she shouted at him. She pulled up her hood and zipped up her top, trying to cover her mouth and nose, but it was too short. Then, she pulled the sleeves over her palms, giving her skin a bit of relief. This was an easy building to climb with loads of nooks and crannies for her feet. Grade A bouldering, kindergarten stuff. She knew the dangers of taking things for granted though, so she took her time pushing up through her feet to the third floor. Before she reached the sill, she looked up. He was leaning out, watching her, and she looked in his eyes. Deep. Blue. Grateful. She mustered the last ounce of energy, pulled through her battered hands and got half her body over the sill. She then pushed her feet in and landed inside.

Tears were rolling down her cheeks because of the smoke. Otto seemed to withdraw inside the room. Not immobilized by a fallen beam, then. She followed him and called out.

“Otto, where are you? What are you doing?” she shouted. When she reached the middle of the room, she wanted to scream. Smoke was streaming from a generator and, beside it a projector generated a hologram of Otto's body, now rolling through the same scenario, asking for help. Saying her name.

Damn it.

FAIL projected behind her eyelids and she woke up violently, her fists clenched in a rage.

“I can do this, I know I can,” Alida shouted, pounding her fist on the floor. She looked around. The others seemed as distraught as she was. A handful were smiling, triumphantly. The Chewer seemed relaxed, up on her happy fitness cloud. Proctor seemed to be sleeping in a relaxed pose. Nothing seemed to get to this guy. He must have a clever come back about how they were all going to die anyway.

It made her feel angry. And powerless.

The ChemFed, standing next to her, remained strangely silent.

The last trial. She was determined to give it all. Deep breath. Relax. Close your eyes.

This time, she was with the whole group. All of them were walking in straight line, like ants following the scent of the leader. There were about ten ahead of her and as many behind her. They got to the river Stura, downstream from the *Ponte dei Suicidi*, where the river flowed through a narrow gorge. A rope bridge hung over the water. One of them inspected the bridge and decided it was safe for all of them to cross, but in twos and threes.

She wasn't that sure but she was swept off by the group, with Clarissa ahead of her.

By the time it was her turn, the bridge was swinging rather alarmingly. Hold your breath, one step at a time.

When she saw Clarissa lose her foothold in front of her, she had a sense of premonition, as if she knew it was going to happen. Her first instinct was to withdraw and go back, get away. But instead she pushed herself forwards, hoping that with only one person on it now the bridge would not sway so wildly. And then it was too late, she had already fallen, holding on to the bridge with one hand, swinging over ...it wasn't

water that lay beneath. It was a pool filled with maggots. Alida curled into a ball. Her stomach heaved.

This wasn't real. How could the river Stura change into a maggot bath? But still, the scenario was so real, Clarissa's screams so vivid, that it was difficult to reason with herself.

Everyone else was watching Clarissa's body as it disappeared in the seething creatures until only her raised hand was visible. Alida pulled herself up, back on the bridge, fought down her feelings of disgust.

Screams ahead of them, and behind her, farther and farther. She was alone on the bridge now. The others were watching from the banks. A damp, putrid smell was rising from the maggot pit, turning her insides. She could hear her own breathing, slow and heavy. She lay on the bridge face down and tried to talk to Clarissa.

The sight of the heaving mass below made her nauseous and she threw up on one side of the bridge, which felt strangely liberating. Then something slimy started crawling up her leg and she froze. She realised she could get very close to the maggot pit if she lowered her body on the one side of the bridge. She swallowed hard and made herself look at the maggots. She could overcome this. Steel yourself, Alida.

She brought her face closer and examined the worms. These were not ordinary maggots. They were fat, as long as her finger and seemingly well-fed. They had small but sharp fangs and their eyes were bulging out of their heads. They moved fast, crawling up the cables that anchored the bridge to the floor of the pit. There was no time. She realised the only way to help Clarissa out of the pit was to release one side of the bridge, turning it into a ladder.

She looked ahead. There were ten cables, five on each side, secured with bolts. Clean, not rusted. She reached out to one and twisted the bolt free. The cable sagged, the bridge tipped to one side. She reached for the next cable and unbolted it, too.

The maggots were seething under her, as if enraged by her efforts. She could only see the top of Clarissa's head now, and her right hand, desperately reaching out upwards. Alida secured her right ankle with one of the loose cables then swung downwards, giving a sharp shriek as she touched Clarissa's hand. She held it for a second, until Clarissa's grip was firm and then used both hands to pull her upwards, out of the pit, until the maggots came only up to her waist. Clarissa took huge, lungfuls of air as she surfaced, the wriggling bodies still clinging to her hair, a horrible evocation of Medusa's face with its halo of snakes. Somehow the classical image made it possible for Alida to tolerate the scene. She felt like a heroine in a Greek myth.

"Can you grab my arms? Pull yourself up," Alida shouted. "Grab on to me. Use my body as a ladder. Then when you're on the bridge, secure your ankle like mine and pull me up."

Clarissa, with showers of maggots falling off her at every movement, did as she was told, dragging herself upwards. She planted a knee on Alida's lower back and used it as step to get onto the bridge. The pain almost knocked the breath out of Alida's lungs. Clarissa took a moment to rest, heaving loudly. The waiting seemed like an eternity as she felt blood pooling in her head, making her dizzy.

On the bridge now, after using the second cable to secure her leg, Clarissa started pulling Alida to safety. They advanced slowly towards solid ground, eventually feeling safe enough to release the cables, the last and most determined worms eventually falling off into the mass below. When they finally made it to the other side, they were received with loud cheers from the other students.

The simulation faded and she realized her vision had returned to normal. Exhausted. Happy. Alida stood upright and looked around. The expression on the ChemFed's face was worth every second of the ordeal.

“Congratulations,” she barked in a softer tone than before. “I didn’t think you had it in you,” she added, as she keyed in ‘PASSED’ on Alida’s wrist.

After uploading everyone’s results she dismissed the class:

“Special Forces, report back tomorrow for your first assignment,” then she zipped out of the room in her floating office.

Five hours of sleep was going to feel like a huge reward. No energy to smile, think or talk. She looked at the group, all shattered and battered, as if they had gone through a real-life war. One by one, they got through a shower zone that divided the cafeteria and the sleeping quarters then into a ventilation area that dried them instantly and brought them to the high hygiene standards New Italy expected of each Juvenile.

Her sleep space was a cubicle the size of a coffin. The sweetest rest she ever had during the sleep shift. The rest before her first proper work shift, taking on the Bloody Brigades.

She was ready.

Chapter 12

How fast do we forget who we were yesterday? Alida woke up with a pounding headache when the alarm went off, five hours later, with a nagging feeling that she had shed her pre-employment identity like a snake sheds its skin. All her worries about Foreclosure, about being left behind while others in her generation had ‘made it’ were fading in her memory.

Today’s anxiety, the one that occupied her entire pre-frontal cortex, was how she was going to cope with the pressures of her first working day. She tried to stretch, but the coffin-bed was too narrow, so she had to crawl out and do a few yoga moves outside, in the common sleeping area, with everyone watching. They were all moving fast, military style. She realised she was too slow. Her body was used to the luxury of her Room Brain preparing her shower and ordering her breakfast to be ready in her parents’ kitchen as soon as she was up-to-hygiene standard.

No clothes next to her sleeping capsule, though. Where had her Juvenile uniform disappeared to? She looked around and saw the others pick their sizes from a side wardrobe stocked with identical camouflage clothing. Of course, they would need new clothes. They were no longer Juveniles like the others. They were bona fide Special Forces, part of the Federali unit.

She felt a pit widen in her stomach. A new uniform. A new behaviour. A new way of thinking, of feeling. Today was going to be a big day. She breathed in, deeply, and hurried to get dressed. She was the last one to leave the dormitory and made it to the Special Forces meeting space, with one second to spare.

The ChemFed was staring at her.

Please, not another set of squats. This time she managed to keep the God appellation to herself. So no aggravating Overly Religious Behaviour added to her record, phew. Alida pressed her lips and lowered her gaze.

The ChemFed looked very elegant in a dark silk suit of a masculine cut. All around her were others all dressed in identical uniforms the colour of concrete buildings, rat-grey. There were neither transportation aids nor whips, at least not as far as Alida could tell. The ChemFed seemed strangely fragile.

“All right, we’re going to form five groups. Four people in each group. These are the groups: The Greens, The Reds, The Blues, The Yellows, The Oranges,” she said and pulled up a differently coloured flag for each of them. “Then I will call out the team leaders first,” she added, as she paced up and down. “These are the best performers from our trials yesterday. After the leaders are in place, when you hear your name, step to the front and form an orderly queue behind your leader. Understood?”

The ChemFed’s voice was less powerful than the day before, probably because of the strain, but it was certainly above normal volume still.

“Yes, Madam,” they all replied as one. There was a noticeable difference in their voices, too. She heard respect. Determination. The trials had brought them together as one group, united in one mission. Alida felt warm inside, as if she had found her family. Her purpose.

The first five names were called out, Clarissa’s among them. Of course, she had shone through the entire day. Especially chewing while doing four hundred push-ups. That woman was a champion. Proctor’s name was in the second wave, and he went to join her, high-fiving her. A third wave of names passed without her name being called out. Alida started to become anxious. What if the ChemFed was going to say that she hadn’t made the grade? That she had changed her mind?

“And finally,” announced the ChemFed, drawing out the words, prolonging the discomfort of the wait. “The Green team is complete with Alida Cuneese.”

Relieved, she exhaled forcefully as she made her way to the back of the queue. In front of her there was a Juvenile who had not stood out the day before. He turned to her to congratulate her. His cheeks flushed, his braces were lame and his hands clammy. If it weren't for the chestnut thick hair swept back in a modern cut, he wouldn't have anything going for him. She gave him a half-hearted thanks and tapped Proctor and Clarissa on the shoulders. They high-fived her enthusiastically. She felt welcome, like she belonged. This fourth guy felt like an intruder. The three of them had something special. Now they had this new guy to deal with. Yes, it was pretty obvious that she didn't treat him the same way as she did Pro & Cla, but hey, what did he expect.

He did mention his name. It was Flavio. Or Fabio, something like that.

“You will report back here at the end of your five-hour shift. Each team has a different objective. I am sending the data now to each team leader,” she added, keying codes in her wristband.

“Good luck,” she then said coldly, turned her back on them and walked away. There was something about the way she said it that made Alida feel that either there wasn't going to be a lot of good luck to be had or that this was another trial disguised as an actual mission and that there would be surprises popping up left right and centre. Well, it was the business of the team leader to bother her pretty little head with these details, wasn't it?

“Soooo, what's up, boss?” Alida asked cheerfully, as she broke rank and came closer to Clarissa. Chewing a pink blob, she continued to scroll the information downloading on her wristband.

“I'm sending the data to all of you now,” she said, absent-mindedly as she blew out a perfectly shaped, sweetly scented bubble.

“We’re off to the Venchi Chocolate Factory,” Clarissa informed them and she made a sign towards the exit. They all followed in silence. They reached the underground parking lot where five Fed zip-rail cars were lined up, all colour-coded according to each Team’s colour. Clarissa opened the Green zip car and they all took their seats with automatic buckles and surround system. Alida felt she had stepped into a time machine.

Dizzy from the onslaught of blinking lights and competing commands, she raised her hand as Clarissa ignited the gear.

“Isn’t the Chocolate Factory where it all began? The whole reason the Feds have cordoned off the Industrial Area?” she threw a question to the group, without aiming at anyone in particular.

“So?” asked Proctor and the new guy in unison.

“So, isn’t that a wild goose chase? How likely is it that the Brigades will still be using at the Chocolate Factory? They’ll be long gone by now.”

The men laughed. Clarissa waved them off. “Shut up, guys, it’s a valid point,” she nodded towards Alida.

It wasn’t satisfying the way she said it. It was more like a condescending concession.’

“I don’t think the ChemFed is taking us seriously, that’s all,” she withdrew into herself, crossing her arms on her chest and looking out of the window. “Or maybe she’s lying to us and this is another test.”

“What’s your name again?” Proctor raised an eyebrow inquisitively towards the new guy. Thankfully.

“Flavio.” He seemed pleased that they’d acknowledged him, at least.

Clarissa finished setting herself up on the driving seat. Driving glasses, screens all lit and ready to give green light, itinerary up on the screen, the ‘start’ button flashing.

She started fumbling through her backpack and extracted a little box with two headphones.

Before she managed to put them in her ears, Proctor reprimanded her, “Oh no, you’re not using that crappy thing — you won’t hear a thing of what we say. You’re the captain, you need to hear what’s going on.” There was anxiety in his voice.

Of course he was right. And the thing was one of those retro Walkman devices. Was this woman born in the eighties? Alida had a distinct taste for antiques, but this was more like ‘refused by charity shops, need a loving home’ type of junk.

“Fiiine,” she said then pfffft-ed through closed lips. “But you’re all listening to Neneh Cherry Homebrew right now,” she connected the old junk to the sound system. “I’m not compromising on that,” she prevented any other mutiny about her leadership style by raising her right forefinger and pointing it back to the team.

“Yeeees, Madam,” they all replied, in a unison voice that was begging for another round of squats.

Luckily, Clarissa was more relaxed than the ChemFed. At her fitness level, no physical punishment would be a real threat. She finally set the zip car in motion and within seconds they were flying at a four storey height, along the Corso Francia, towards the Industrial Area at the opposite end of Cuneo.

Flavio, sat directly opposite Alida, was biting his nails. It was a touchingly childish thing in him, though she’d have ridiculed Marco if he did it. She wondered whether to ask whether he was hungry, but decided he could take care of himself. They were all grown up now.

The view of Cuneo was rolling beneath them, the historic buildings with their stained concrete facades and the new buildings glittering with glass making the town seem like a distinguished Elderly actress impeccably dressed for an award night, her best jewellery flickering under the photographers’ flashes.

Her ears were reluctantly picking up Neneh Cherry's rhythm. There must be a reason certain artists thankfully disappear from public consciousness. Mercifully, the zip car was the fastest mode of transportation she had ever been on. Before the end of the first song, they had reached the periphery of the Industrial Area and had to disembark.

Fed cars were parked in an orderly fashion and the other teams were seemingly already on site.

The sky pattern was lead and purple, a generic dusk mixture. There was something unsettling about the arrangement of the programme. Perhaps too many shadows and too little light. No wonder she preferred the brighter arrangements. They put her in a good mood.

"Curfew enforced in four hours and thirty minutes. We'd better get this job done fast, let's move it," Clarissa announced drily after checking her wristband. She projected the itinerary on a handheld screen for all the team members to see.

"Memorised the turns?" she checked their eyes then put the gadget back in her top pocket. She rolled up the hard-shelled hoodie of her uniform and clicked it into place, like a helmet, and tapped her chest to activate the forward torch. She looked like an alien from an old science fiction film, thought Alida as she copied each of her moves. The Chocolate Factory was a building she knew well from her doctoral research. It wasn't as classic as the Paper Factory, but still noteworthy for the millennial-style decoration and the manufacturing plant, where the mixing vats, the pouring nozzles and the conveyor belts were still in place.

"Can you believe this place used to produce 40,000 kilograms of chocolate a day when it was running at full capacity." They ignored her. It was probably difficult to hear through the hard-shelled hoodie anyway.

She realised she hadn't activated the speaker, so she switched on the audio channel built in her collar: "Hey guys," she tried again.

"We heard you the first time," Proctor interrupted her. A roar of collective laughter followed.

"And they used fifteen thousand kilograms of cocoa, which they had to import from Africa."

After all these years, the smell of cocoa lingered in the air. The closer they got, the more powerful it became. Nothing took it away, neither the decay, nor the overgrowth. The artificial rain did not wash it away.

"Did you guys know cocoa is a main ingredient in nirvana buttons?" This time, it was Flavio who spoke. How the hell did he know that?

"Now you're talkin'!" exclaimed Proctor.

"Guys, shut up and focus," Clarissa calmed the spirits down.

Yeah, go sister! Although there were only four of them and if they did run into the Brigades, they'd most certainly be outnumbered, Alida felt strangely safe. Her position was last in the patrol group, so she was turning all the time, lighting up the path they'd taken, looking out for an ambush from the rear. But she felt completely protected at the thought that Clarissa had their backs. She seemed to be in control. So much more clear-headed than these two immature boys.

After they crossed a rough patch of overgrowth, under a thick canopy of trees, the Chocolate Factory presented itself in front of them like a cathedral. Silent, tall, a testimony of things passed. They all stood there for a second, taking it all in. The smell of cocoa was very strong now. Clarissa made a sign that they should spread out and that Proctor and herself were going to circle back and see whether it was all clear. Alida distanced herself from Flavio and tried to peer inside the building. Large wooden panels blocked her view. They had been nailed to the doors and windows and the nails had

bled rust that streaked the wood. The iron rails were all covered in powdery rust.

Graffiti sprayed across concrete walls were saying predictable things about chocolate and sex. Yes, indeed, why would one need nirvana buttons if one could eat chocolate to one's heart's desire?

The four of them fanned out and walked forward side-by-side, according to the plan. Flavio, nearest to her, suddenly lowered his weapon and stopped by a pillar at the entrance. He patted the surface, his fingers disturbing soft brown dust. He licked his fingers, then the pillar.

“Are you crazy, Flavio? That's not cocoa, it's rust. For all you know it's toxic. You're going to die.” Raise your voice and the enemy will hear, don't stop him and who knows what'll happen to the moron.

“It is cocoa. Well, most of it, some of it,” he conceded, wiping his mouth. “It tastes good. Funny, but good.” She pulled him away.

“Spit it out, you idiot. There's all kinds of chemicals in these places. You never eat anything, it's a massive hazard.” Meanwhile, Clarissa and Proctor had stopped and were watching, amazement on their faces. They didn't need an update from her to understand what had happened.

Proctor came close to Flavio and put an arm on his shoulder, taking control. Alida stepped back.

“Dude,” he said. “Since you're a bit of a virgin in this type of situation, let's agree that you'll guard the entrance and keep an eye out on any unusual activity, all right? And stay away from the stuff that looks like chocolate, mate, OK? Like Alida says, do not ingest.” As he uttered this sentence, he made the ‘I am watching you’ sign, pointing two fingers at his eyes. Flavio smiled.

At the doors, the plan was for Alida to go in first. She took a step then stopped abruptly.

“Do we know about the traps? All the factories have been wired up against squatters. Are they still live? We should sweep the building or we go straight into a minefield. We could be blown up at the next step.” Nothing on the plan about the traps. Why not? Her insides started shaking.

“The CemFed disabled them this morning for all the targets,” Clarissa replied. “We don’t want to blow up our own people, do we?” she laughed, a nervous tremor flickering in her voice. Alida wasn’t relieved. If anything, she felt her anxiety grow.

“If you say so,” she stepped forward, as carefully as if walking on broken glass. Their first step into the Chocolate Factory might as well been first step on the moon. It felt special to the last bone in her body.

The first hall, the dispatch area, was a derelict space with holes in the far wall where the conveyor belts ended. A few drones hovered close to the ceiling. The hall itself had been gutted of all machinery. Alida took small steps close to the wall, avoiding the centre of the room. Looking up, she saw a web of iron stairs, lights and lifts. There was an internal staircase, at one end of the space. She made eye contact with Clarissa. Fierce nod. So she was anxious too. There were beads of sweat on her top lip. The uniform was designed for movement. There was a build up of heat if you slowed down.

One drone buzzed around her ears and came close to her face, scanning it. She allowed it to do its job then pressed towards the staircase which seemed like a late addition to the factory, a temporary scaffolding that had been set up in one of the late rehabilitation projects. Not built do last and now it had been rotting for years. Was it usable? She took hold of the handrail and shook it. Nothing moved. It seemed solid.

Satisfied that it was going to hold her weight, she turned around and said, “Looks like it’ll hold. One at a time. Proctor last.”

At the level of the floor above a thin layer of the brown dust that had deceived Flavio covered everything. But no footprints, not even scuff marks. No one had been there for a long time. Everything was undisturbed. She pulled her body into the room and looked around. This must have been an office. There were a few bits of furniture scattered about, clear-walled partitions and a door standing open, giving access to a long corridor. This was the executive floor. She saw Proctor's top of the head coming up behind her and she motioned along the corridor. On one wall, the two legendary bronze pots that Mr Venchi had used at the beginning of his career as a chocolatier. She was surprised they hadn't been vandalised. Upon inspection, she saw that they had been welded into the concrete wall. Numerous scratchings adorned the sides, sign that many have indeed tried to destroy these symbols of decadence from before The Change.

“Are you done? Do we need to inspect the next rooms?” Proctor nudged her. His voice was shaky. It made her uncomfortable. She could do without two bosses on her first day.

She moved slowly inside the corridor, breathing deeply, taking her time. Her weapon, although she held it with two hands, shook slightly. A door was ajar at the very end of the corridor, on the right-hand side. Her heart skipped a beat. For some reason, she felt the need to move in fast, get it over with. She flung the door open. Graffiti on the walls all the way up to the ceiling. There was a powerful smell inside, like paint, thinner most likely. Her lips parted slightly. She entered the next room room. It was spotless, as if recently swept. She approached the double-glazed window and could see in the distance a corner of the Good Wall, but instead of the great art of the classical period it seemed to be covered in crude drawings and slogans. She withdrew as if electrocuted. The graffiti on the building was an exact copy of that day's Good Wall pattern.

She turned around to share the news with her team. Behind her, Proctor and Clarissa were blocking the exit door. Before she could open her mouth, they threw a net that immobilised her. A fucking jungle net trap. Alida wanted to scream, but her voice gave. All she could muster was a shocked moan.

“You fuckers,” she managed to seethe through her teeth. “What the hell are you doing?” What was going on? Was this part of the exercise?

They moved fast. Clarissa packed her up as if she was a shopping bag and threw her over her shoulders. Proctor keyed in a code into a panel on the wall and the floor parted, revealing a convenient merchandise lift. The three of them boarded and they descended fast underground. Alida yelled until a well-placed elbow in her ribs silenced her.

When they got to the last stop on their underground journey, somewhere deep and humid, Clarissa dumped her on the ground like a sack of potatoes.

“What’s wrong with you?” she asked, as soon as Proctor pulled her out of the net. “Where the fuck am I? What is this? Is this part of the exercise?” Her first instinct was to attack him but then she changed her mind. She sharpened her senses to take in her surroundings. They had arrived in an ante-chamber, illuminated by the light coming through a small door with a low stone lintel that made her think of the medieval houses in the ancient quarter of the city. Camilla dragged her through the doorway and made her lie on the floor, which was smooth, man-made. She could smell a waft of cocoa, possibly from the broken fragments of shells that hadn’t been swept up. From her research she remembered that there were storage rooms for the cocoa beans below the factory floor. What a wasteful process, feeding the luxurious appetites of old Italy. The entire production of one tree only generated half a kilo of cocoa. No wonder the room was like a bank vault. Its contents must have been worth ridiculous amounts of money.

She raised her head and pushed herself into a sitting position. Her mouth dried instantly. She needed to rub her eyes a few times. Her voice was trapped in her throat.

There were other people there. A handful of Blue Hairs, seated in a semi-circle, were staring at her as if she was an alien. Her mind was in over-drive. This was a renegade camp, the rat-hole where runaway Juveniles were hiding out to avoid Foreclosure and the Feds. Why had Clarissa and Proctor dragged her into an enemy cell? She turned around to look for clues on their faces.

Clarissa had already sat down in the circle, unzipped her uniform jacket, taken off her hoodie and was pouring herself tea. The Blue Hairs were acknowledging her presence with a smile. Even in the dim light Alida could see that all of them had hair that was entirely blue, not a strand of black or blonde remaining. Meanwhile, Proctor had offloaded his gear and was sitting behind her. Around the room were heaps of equipment, grounded drones, stacks of weapons. Her eyes moved from Clarissa to Proctor to the Blue Hairs, looking for answers.

“What’s going on?” she tried to sound calm and collected, but she could tell her high pitch was giving away her fear.

“Chill, princess, Otto will be with us in a moment,” Proctor said. He pulled over a drone and started to examine it, as if to see if it needed to be repaired. She could see him in her peripheral view, without turning her head, but Otto’s name startled her.

“Otto? Is he here?” This was just bizarre. Some kind of test in the exercise, a trial of her loyalty. Well, at least Otto would not harm her. Probably.

“Hey you,” she heard him behind her. There he was, putting a hand on her shoulder, reassuringly, coming to sit on the floor in front of her. She was ready to pour out her anger on him, but upon setting eyes on him, she couldn’t find the right words. He looked weather-worn. He was fumbling with the fastening on his jacket and she could see that his fine motor skills had deteriorated. She would have given him twice

his age if not more. The Blue Hairs saluted him, and he nodded towards them, peacefully.

He held out both his hands, palms up, toward her, a gesture of invitation. Conciliation. She refused to reach out to him.

“What are you doing here? What the hell is going on? You told me you needed help in the Death Valley to cross il Monte,” she spewed the words in one breath.

“I came back because as I got halfway into the Death Valley, I heard what’s happening. I had to come back. You know the Government has a shiny new plan for Full Foreclosure? Your dear father dreamed it up. People like us are going to be farmed, Alida. Kept fit and healthy so the Gerontocrats can harvest our organs. The orders went out yesterday. Time is running out,” he said, calmly. “So now I — we — need your help.”

“I’m done helping you, Otto. Did you grass me up after our meeting at the Paper Factory? I got picked up by the ChemFeds. They pumped me with some serious shit.” She winced, remembering the Chem ordeal. “Friends do not put friends in danger,” she repeated her father’s mantra. “Anyway, what can I do? Ask my Dad nicely to change his mind?” She felt her cheeks were flushed and swallowed slowly to calm herself down. Her heart was overwhelmed with pity for him, but also anger. Ever since he came back in her life, he had only caused trouble for her.

“Let me explain.” On his forehead, beads of sweat flickered in the fluorescent light.

“How about you tell me the truth?” she held her position. “Am I your prisoner? Why did you bring me here? And how come these two,” she added, pointing at Clarissa and Proctor, “are working for you?”

“I know you have a lot of questions, Alida, give me a chance,” he said, moving closer.

“No more lies, Otto. I had a job, you know that? I was home safe, and then you fuck it up for me...”

“The truth and nothing but the truth,” he confirmed, moving closer to her. “You are not a prisoner; you are free to go whenever you wish,” he started. Then, he motioned towards the Blue Hairs in the room, introducing each one:

“This is Soso, PhD in Molecular Physics,” he pointed at a Blue Hair with a beard up to his waist. “He and Geeta here, her doctorate is in Chemistry. These two put the I in our IEDs. And Geeta is also making the meanest nutrition shots and nirvana buttons this side of the law. Did you realise you were funding the revolution every time you scored? New Italy may not have a use for their talents, but we certainly do.”

The group acknowledged his joke with a light laughter. Geeta was slim and tiny, like a child in secondary school, with big, bright eyes. She didn’t seem old enough to be any kind of graduate.

Otto continued. “Frieda here,” he said, pointing at a girl with chocolate skin and coloured streaks in her hair, “has a PhD in Music and Sonic Arts. She developed a low-frequency umbrella for our shelter. It jams the scanners. We can’t be detected with the Gerontocrats’ technology.”

He turned towards Proctor. “You’ve obviously met Proctor. He’s our drone guru, Aerospace Technology — he’s got all the drones in the Industrial Area under control,” he said admiringly. “Then, last but not least, Clarissa, our BioChem genius who’s testing the whole Blue Hair gene modification. She’s had mixed results for now, but we’re hopeful. If we can pull that off, you’ll be able to buy a stem cell swap that will return your hair growth to normal.”

The rainbow-haired girl must be part of the experiment, too, mused Alida. They all seemed less scary now that Otto had done the introductions.

“So what are you? Is this the whole Bloody Brigades? You’re not starving in the sewers, raising snotty, malnourished children?” she asked, voicing the stereotype that she had been brought up on by Gerontocrat propaganda.

Laughter shook everyone present. There was nothing funny about her description, surely.

“That’s us. We six are the entire Bloody Brigades. Some of us are living normal lives, regular citizens, part of society.” He nodded towards Clarissa and Proctor. “I’m the only one who’s off the grid. Everyone else is above suspicion. Sure, we have sympathisers who help us, but no one knows the full story. And no one is starving,” he added, reassuringly.

She was genuinely surprised. She expected to see hundreds of tired, malnourished, Vitamin D-deficient young people living underground, suicidal fanatics preparing to blow themselves up in the name of freedom. What she had in front of her eyes was a bunch of over-educated, privileged Juveniles who seemed to be doing the whole Bloody Brigades thing as a sort of exercise in mindfulness.

“Why?” she asked, shaking her head. Too many questions were unanswered. She didn’t know where to start.

“Why what?” he knitted his brow. His curls had turned Blue in their entirety now and they him a strange aura, distant and cold. “Because otherwise the Gerontocrats will kill us all. That’s a good reason to me. Our bodies will be cut up for spare parts, our bones ground down to reconstitute the crumbling skeletons of our parents and our reproductive organs kept for cloning a new generation of medical resources.”

“But why so few of you?”

“It will only need a few of us. Because you can only do so much with ignorant masses,” he anticipated the rest of her question. “Sure, we could call in all the Commoners, have a people’s revolution, take to the streets. The Gerontocrats would just

wipe us out. You know the Good Wall technology works both ways? They could fry a mob to ashes in a few seconds. This way, we are all well placed in the system to give it a deathly blow. We are nimble, well educated, have access to power and know exactly how rotten it is,” he added, passionately.

“Then what do you need me for? Should I gather that you were trying to recruit me when we met at the Paper Factory?” she came right out with the question that mattered to her most.

He stood there in silence. Geeta had stopped typing away at her screen. Soso put a lid on a pot cooking something with a foul smell. All eyes were on Otto. Her chest tightened.

“Because your father is the author of the Final Foreclosure Programme and now the Gerontocrats are moving forward with it. They’re going to wipe out our generation, Alida. You’re the only person who can get to the heart of the system.” He stressed the last sentence.

“I’ve never heard of this thing. You’d better tell me about it.” She braced herself, as if before a car crash.

“Your Dad’s Master Plan? The future of New Italy. They intend to harvest 100 million organs from Juveniles and re-arrange the social structure. The Gerontocrat class will be physically regenerated and organs that are surplus to requirements will be sold on the international market to keep the economy strong. The new generations will be raised to be in one of three categories: Breeders, pre-Civicos or Bodies. There will be zero social mobility. And no more education, because New Italy has all the brains it needs now. For most people, the only reason they exist will be to keep the Gerontocrats alive.”

“What does it mean for us?” she asked. She listened to his explanation. It didn’t seem impossible, but at the same time, she remembered her father’s nerves before a big

meeting, the long days he'd spent working, the way he'd cut himself off from her, stopped talking. Her body reacted, independently from her mind. Her chest tightened. Was her father really capable of this?

“We are the first generation to enter the Master Plan Programme. All of us, all thirty-three year olds, regardless of their position in society now, will be taken away, our body parts assessed and harvested and then we'll be killed. In this period of transition, we expect a lot of abuses. No one is safe. You're either with us, or you're dead, it's as simple as that.”

An ice-cold wave swept over her. It can't possibly be true. She had a job, she was protected. This wasn't about her.

“You're not safe any more just because you have a job,” he said. “That's why I recalled Clarissa and Proctor. They infiltrated the Feds years ago and finally made the Special Forces team. But with Full Foreclosure, we don't know. They can be culled off the street, just like anyone else. We don't know who's actually carrying out the Programme. It's classified. We need to re-group,” he said. Nods and head tilting all around.

Alida placed her face in her hands, her elbows on her knees. Her brain hurt. What to believe? Was any of this true, or some sick mind-game? Or even a bad dream?

“So you want me to spy on my father?” Time to point out the elephant in the room.

“Yes,” he said. Drily. At least he was forthcoming about it.

“I don't know, Otto,” she pushed back. “I don't have any great skills — I mean, look at your team. They're all a bunch of brainiacs. When push comes to shove, what can I do? Nothing concrete. My Dad's not an idiot. He'll see me coming half a kilometer away...”

“Hey, don’t beat yourself up, you must have some kind of superpower — everyone does!” She was surprised to hear Proctor’s voice. Was he trying to make her feel better?

“Once, I managed to over-write a Gerontocrats’ order. I don’t know if I can do it again. It was pretty random,” she offered, shrugging her shoulders.

“Wow,” Proctor replied. “Your chick’s got mad skills,” he chuckled in Otto’s direction.

“And I’d like some respect, Otto, if you want me on your side.”

“Whatever, dude. Chill,” Proctor replied, withdrawing to his corner. He picked up another drone and started examining it. There was silence in the room. She could hear Clarissa’s chewing loudly. Then she stopped, aware that hers was the only sound in the profound silence.

“You are the closest we can possibly get to the brain of the Full Foreclosure programme,” started Otto, looking her deep in the eyes. “If there’s anything we can do to stop his disaster, we must do it. You have unique access to the man in charge. And we’re thinking we can’t do this alone, behind the Good Wall, cut off from the rest of the world. So we will need to leave. And you’re an excellent climber. Cervino really is our exit plan and we’ve never done it with a large group of people, we need an experienced guide, someone like you who knows every rock and every root on that mountain,” he added.

Was her father so evil? Was he going to kill her entire generation? Was he going to kill her? This was insane. Can’t comprehend. But she needed to know.

“What do you need from me?” she asked.

“I need you to go back to your life. Find out as much information about Full Foreclosure as you can and get it to us. We need to know the plan before we can figure out how to stop it. We don’t even know how much time we have,” he said.

“What about today?” If I’m going back to the ChemFed without Clarissa and Proctor, they’ll suspect something’s up.

“I’m sending you back. Tell them that we tried to kidnap the three of you and that we let you go on purpose — with a message for your father. The other two are hostages.”

“What message?” she asked.

“Just tell him ‘You’re next.’” Otto said.

She looked at her palms and folded them. Cracked joints. Always released tension.

“Ok, I’ll figure something out. I need help though,” she said.

“Anything,” said Otto.

“I need to know I can communicate with you through a secure device. Can Proctor fix me up?” she asked.

“I thought you’d never ask,” answered Proctor cheerfully. She went over to his corner. He cleared the mess and put a small object in front of her, the size of a cockroach. “Introducing the ladybug. The smallest drone I’ve ever made. Lighter than the wind, faster than a cheetah. You can upload files directly from your wrist and programme her GPS coordinates with your voice. She transmits on the dark web.”

Alida emptied her rucksack in front of him: an origami crane, the short rope and the pair of climbing shoes fell out. She shoved the shoes and the rope back in and put the origami crane forward.

“Can you put the drone inside the origami? Can they fly together?” she asked, hopeful.

Proctor looked at the neat folds of the origami, his lips pursed. “Nice work,” he said. “I can do better than that,” he added. “I can use special foil to line up your

origami, so the drone is practically invisible,” he said excitedly. His joy around gadgets was infectious. “I need five minutes,” he said, dismissing her. Man at work.

Her wristband buzzed, pricking her skin. She knew it could only be the emergency channel, which didn’t need the band to be online. She checked it, her senses alert. It was a short message: “Meet me in Friske’s office urgently. Dad.” Her heart started pounding out of control. She was going to be put to test even sooner than she thought.

“Otto, I need to go. Now. Look at this.” She showed him the message. He locked his eyes on her and lingered, waiting for an answer.

“Wish me luck,” she said. “I need to go,” she added, raising her hand in a farewell greeting towards the group. They nodded, then saluted her, with their right fist brought to their chest. Bloody Brigade salute. She’d better remember it.

She hesitated, then gave Otto a hug. His body was frail, his heart beating fast.

“Thank you. Princess.” He mumbled it, as if he didn’t want the others to hear. “You see why we have to get out, don’t you? As long as Italy is closed off, the world doesn’t know what’s happening here, doesn’t know how oppressed the Juveniles are and how the Government is planning to exterminate the population. We need to open up our country. We need to disable the Killing Fields. I know we can do it. Together,” he squeezed her upper arms between his bony fingers, then released her.

Before she left the room, Proctor handed her the drone disguised inside the foil-lined origami. And gave her an awkward hug.

She waited before going outside, trying to spot Flavio, peering through the boards blocking the windows. He was on his back on the ground, singing to himself and chewing on a piece of rusty, cocoa-sprinkled iron. Stoned out of his mind.

She reached out into her chest pocket, took out the Sci-Tech coin from her father and slipped it inside the drone wrapped up in the origami. It looked beautiful. Then, she

quickly zipped herself up, pulled the hoodie over her hair and with a confident stride went outside. Indeed, when approaching Flavio, his eyes were rolling back in his head. She pulled him on his feet and tried to walk him to the zip car. The others were long gone.

It was pitch dark, so when she fired up the car, the headlights revealed the Industrial Park bathed in a milky mist. She pulled the car up and forward. Flavio was snoring next to her. She made sure he was buckled up so he wouldn't fall on the command panel.

The return itinerary was already keyed in, so she put the zip car on auto-pilot. There were thirty minutes left for them to make it back to the Special Forces base. Plenty of time. She thought she would drop Flavio off first then explain to the ChemFed that there was an ambush and that she would explain everything after returning from the meeting with her father.

As they approached *Ponte dei Suicidi*, she started hearing sirens. Then, beaming headlights. Fed cars, all darting toward the Chocolate Factory.

At the end of the bridge, there was a Fed patrol blocking the zip-rail highway. She slowed down then stopped the vehicle. Her heart in her throat, she waited calmly for the inspector to come over. He was a bull of a man, more steroids than flesh or blood.

“Signorina, you are driving past curfew,” he initiated.

She pulled out her hand wrist with the curfew permit that Friske had keyed in for her after their Paper Factory encounter and handed it over to him. “We’re with a Special Forces unit, officer. Secret operation in the Industrial Park. I have to report back now. I’m sure you understand,”

“What’s wrong with your colleague?” the Fed asked, putting his bald, sweaty head through the window.

“Cocoa poisoning. It’s pretty toxic back there.” Alida slapped Flavio lightly on his shoulder. The movement jolted him semi-awake. Then he vomited all over the command panel and all over himself, as the seat belt pulled him back.

“Eww,” the Fed withdrew, disgusted. “Rather you than me, sister.” He handed back the wristband to Alida and motioned her to go. She could see the swarm of Fed cars surrounding the Chocolate Factory. It was most certainly a bust. Would they be safe in the storage rooms? Otto, Proctor, Clarissa, Geeta, Soso, Frieda: they all seemed part of her family now, as if she had known them forever. And Otto. She was worried. He was getting sicker. Was it true, what he had said — that they would kill him if they ever caught him?

She wondered what would have happened if she had still been there. If she hadn’t received the message from her father. Had Dad known what was coming down, sent the message to protect her? If Otto was right, he must know everything. Even thoughts she hadn’t thought yet. Was her father really the man who’d devised this terrible plan to kill them all – kill her, even. Was she Daddy’s pride and joy or a freedom fighter with the Bloody Brigades? Information, information. Anyone could say anything and Otto had lied already. Find out the truth, then make up her mind who was she going to help in the end.

Chapter 13

The heating system inside Antonio's zip-rail car was broken. He had just come out of an intense cardio session and the temperature outside that early morning on Labour Day 57 felt even chillier than usual. He slapped the heating switch, tapped it, wiggled it, but no luck. Stubborn, stupid machines.

He'd just put some music on. Something with a good beat. Marcia had been right. Music was bound to put him in a good mood. He hadn't been in a good mood in a long time. He only had himself to blame, though. Telling himself everything was going to be all right if only he became an Elder. What had happened to his family while he was not looking?

He ignited the zip car and set the destination. The Federali Headquarters. He checked his band— his meeting with Friske had been confirmed in thirty minutes. Breathe in and out. Steady. Focus. The transaction was going to go smoothly, there was no reason for it not to. Alida was going to meet him there. Simple. He ran his fingers through his coarse hair and buttoned up his black silk shirt. Start.

How could he be so blind? His wife had cheated on him. Had been cheating all though their marriage. Now she was saying Alida wasn't even his daughter. Lying to him for all those years? They had quarrelled before. If she was just bluffing, she would have used the card before, not wait until his divorce decision. Questions were pounding in Antonio's head on loop. The low temperature didn't help. His mind felt like slush.

He knew she was betraying him afterwards, during their marriage. Everyone knew things change. Flesh was weak. Everyone was doing it anyway, nothing spectacular about it. But to take his flesh and blood away from him, it was just...treacherous. To trick him into bringing up another man's child, to take away his precious daughter, all those years, it was just despicable.

After the Council of Elders, Arturo's words echoed in his head: Remember, we have Alida. He had felt trapped. But when Camilla said, "But she's not your daughter," in that triumphant tone, part of him was almost relieved. He half hated himself that the first thing that came to his mind was how useful that life reversal was turning out to be. Much easier to sacrifice a child who wasn't yours. He fixed the meeting with Friske as soon as he could, nevertheless. He was going to sort out his feelings towards Camilla and towards Alida afterwards. All that wasted time, taking her to playgrounds and teaching her how to climb. Taking her to the hospital when Camilla was not bothered. He could have played golf instead, too. But he showed up. Did the right thing.

He shook his head, swallowing the unpleasant desire to sneeze but not quite being able to.

First things first. Stop the blackmail. Make yourself invulnerable.

No one likes being blackmailed, that's for sure. To be at the receiving end was intensely frustrating, to say the least. It made his blood boil. But he was going to turn the tables on them. He'd just go and tell them straight to their faces that they had nothing on him. His knuckles were white on the command screen as he changed direction through a sleepy neighbourhood street.

As he zipped through the city after curfew, he took in the calm, the order. How safe it all was. How art infused the air was with the glory of things past, reminding everyone how great they were as a nation, as people. The Good Wall was projecting Uccello's nighttime series of paintings of the battle of San Romano. What a glorious city, Cuneo, and what a glorious country, New Italy. He had a vision for this country. He was going to make sure he was creating the best possible future for it. His Full Foreclosure programme was going to be remembered forever. So what if he didn't have a daughter anymore. He was going to be remembered by everyone. Forever. He was everyone's Father.

Antonio's zip car skidded in front of the Federali HQ. He told the doorman to get the heating repaired and saw the vehicle vanish into the HQ parking.

A woman with a handheld hologram she called Biscuit showed him to the right lift capsule which propelled him directly to Friske's office.

He didn't expect Friske to be so tall, or so mean-looking, with the deep scar barely concealed by his shirt neck. It looked like a wound that had bled rather severely before it was stitched. Some kind of fight that earned his Commander stripes, perhaps?

"Welcome to my office, Dr Cuneese," Friske held out an oversized palm and gave him a firm hand shake.

"The pleasure is all mine, Commander Friske. Thank you for seeing me at such short notice," Antonio mouthed the usual niceties and sat comfortably in the armchair that Friske indicated to him. The social spaces in Federali buildings were always small and strange. After all, the security forces weren't noted for their conversation. This one was decorated with a sad pot plant, a vanilla-scented ivy. The view from the ceiling-to-floor window overlooking the Berlusconi square was better than his, he had to admit.

"I would offer you something to drink, but I'm sure you'd rather cut to the chase, a man in a leading position like yours must surely be on an exceptionally tight schedule," Friske sank awkwardly into the chair opposite him.

"Indeed, Commander Friske, you are quite right," he said, taking a second to measure up his opponent. He had an imperceptible smirk on his face, possibly a permanent muscle damage. His eyes were sharp, steely and dark and his crow-black hair was slicked back with a neat undercut. He seemed stylishly groomed and in perfect shape. Men like that were paying attention to details. He needed to be careful.

"First, I would like to thank you for the collegial favour you have done for me when my daughter," he stumbled upon the word, then resumed, "my daughter, Alida,

was caught breaking curfew.” His sandwich conversation strategy was off to a good start. Friske nodded silently.

“Of course, I’m sure that your boss, Elder Arturo, has informed you of our talk after the Council of Elders meeting.” He paused, trying to read Friske’s reaction, but his face was impenetrable. That’s the trouble when two play the same game. It was like Bobby Fischer against Kasparov in the Match of the Century. He was determined to win against the Federali champion like Bobby had won against the Soviet chess machine.

“He had little reason to hide his delight at having a collateral in our little scuffle over who gets to be Elder next,” Antonio attempted an ‘I-know-you-know’ smile then his throat closed up and became itchy. Must have been the draught in that darned zip car without heating. “I’d like some water please.” His voice sounded raspy already.

Friske’s floor-length silk coat made a whoosh sound as he made his way towards the Room Brain panel and ordered ice cold water and a caffeine capsule for himself. They drank in silence for a moment.

“So, having said that,” Antonio resumed, “and regardless of your motives, I want to thank you for taking her under your wing in the Special Forces. I checked her employment status before I came and it’s quite impressive to see her being promoted so fast,” He paused to take a sip of water. He wished Friske hadn’t ordered the ice cubes, but now it was too late. He warmed the water in his mouth then swallowed it, tilting his head backwards.

“I am most happy to see the close collaboration between the Cultural Division and the Federali,” he drew out the positive words as much as he could. “It sets an example for us all.”

“Certainly, Dr Cuneese,” Friske broke his silence. “Your daughter is an exceptionally gifted young woman. I recognized at once that she had unusual abilities. You can rest assured that we promote everyone based on merit and our assessment

system is second to none,” he added, with pride in his voice. Too much pride and not enough sincerity, if Antonio had to give his opinion on the spot.

“Of course New Italy is a truly meritocratic country,” he shifted his weight in the armchair. “Especially in the Federali system, where honour and truth are the quintessential values on which the service is built.

“Of course,” said Friske.

“That’s good to know, Commander.” Antonio tried very hard not to make his sarcasm too obvious. “From my side, I would like to release any pressure you or Arturo may have ever felt to employ Alida because of the fact that she was my daughter. What I mean is that a man in my position must be very careful. And he is responsible not only for his own conduct but that of his family. Not only must we avoid nepotism of any kind but we must be seen to avoid it. No shadow of suspicion on that score so I would prefer it if you withdrew Alida’s offer of employment in case this offer was made because of her last name,” He paused to gauge Friske’s reaction. The Commander looked genuinely surprised, his eyebrows raised, one hand covering his mouth. But it didn’t mean he believed him, so he pressed on laying his path to the only possible conclusion. “Surely, in the interest of truth and honour, my daughter shouldn’t get any special treatment just because of the Cuneese name, don’t you agree? And Antonio lay back in his armchair, waiting for Friske’s response.

Friske seemed to weigh Antonio’s words carefully. After a while, he offered a non-committal “I understand.” He walked over to his desk, opened up the line with the receptionist who confirmed Alida was waiting downstairs to be shown in. He then spent a few minutes scrolling through his incoming live stream, then re-dialled and asked her to send Alida up.

“I see you have invited your daughter to join this meeting,” Friske said, with a quizzical look on his face. Not the ideal timing, but beggars can’t be choosers. Ideally, he would have wanted to have Friske’s confirmation before Alida got there.

“Certainly,” he replied, his tone crisp. “I think it’s best for everyone involved to be present,” he added ceremoniously. The last thing he wanted was to have Alida interfere with his plan. Make a scene or break down a cry, or some other god-awful thing like that.

He didn’t turn around when she came in. He heard her voice: tired, overly excited, like a little girl’s. Almost cranky.

She didn’t stride towards him to give him a kiss, as she would, normally. Friske’s presence was a deterrent. She came closer to take a seat next to his, no doubt as Friske indicated. He acknowledged her presence coldly.

“Hi Dad,” she tried to make eye contact. He didn’t meet her gaze. She reached out and touched him on his resting hand, and whispered “Are you ok?” as she leaned towards him, but he withdrew his hand and looked away.

Friske, puzzled by the coldness between the two of them, returned to his seat with a handheld screen and read out loud: “I’ve just been informed that the Fed Raid on the Chocolate Factory has been successful and the main leaders of the Bloody Brigades have been arrested. Congratulations. Dr Cuneese, your daughter is a heroine. We have neutralised the greatest threat to our national security.”

“What?” both Antonio and Alida asked at the same time. He wished he sounded less taken by surprise, so he could gauge the emotion in Alida’s voice. He had missed it and wanted to kick himself. He looked at her from the corner of his eye. She was perched on the edge of the armchair, her torso turned to him, her shoulders and face towards Friske, in an uncomfortable twist.

“Four terrorists were captured in a Special Forces operation that saw two young Special Forces officers detect irregularities at the Chocolate Factory,” he quoted from the internal top secret info line on his screen. “Four operatives were involved in the search mission. It is a triumph for the Federali, and we should all congratulate Elder Arturo for his leadership, I will spare you the details.” Friske had a grin from one ear to another.

He turned towards Alida, and asked “I understand you and young operative Flavio were outside, securing the premises while your colleagues Clarissa and Proctor were taking the Bloody Brigades leaders down?”

His gaze moved from Friske’s face to hers then back to Friske’s. She was taking her time, her cheeks blotted with red.

“And just because your Father demanded you should attend this meeting, you couldn’t join operatives Proctor and Clarissa in the final take down, correct?” Friske added, talking to Antonio more than her. What he implied was that she was less of a hero because of him. Great job having a scapegoat on hand, Friske.

“Yes, that’s right.” She seemed more surprised than either of them. Friske’s triumphant face deserved a punch.

“Congratulations,” Friske got to his feet, towering over her. Awkwardly, she pushed herself up from the armchair. To avoid feeling small, but mainly to avoid looking into his crotch.

“Such a significant act of courage on your first day with the service,” he added, shaking her hand demonstratively.

Antonio cleared his throat and pushed his body forward.

“Commander Friske, as you know I am a very busy man,” he interjected. Alida remained standing, as if expecting him to come and give her a hug or at least congratulate her. Her eyes were opened wide. Eventually, she sat down. Friske must

feel on top of the world after this confidence boost. His desk wall started buzzing. This was big news. He was probably going to update the Council of Elders shortly as well.

Antonio's face felt ashen. The cold of the morning had soaked through his bones.

"But I must go back to our discussion earlier. I have reason to believe that Alida has stolen government property," he said, while maintaining eye contact with Friske. He didn't turn to her at all, not even when he said her name.

"What?" she jumped from her seat. "What are you talking about? Dad?" she looked him straight in the eyes. Her hands on his wrists, shaking them.

Friske stood up, removed her from Antonio's private space and pushed her gently into her seat: "Please sit down, we're getting to the bottom of this," he said, drily.

He finally turned to her. "Where is the coin?"

Her face was a study in astonishment. "What coin? What are you talking about, Dad?"

Tears were welling up in her eyes. He had a narrow window of sanity before she pulled some kind of womanly hysterics.

"You took a coin from me. Instead of a coin with the Sci-Tech vaccine code, you took one that had top secret encrypted data," he said coldly. He stared her down. If she wanted to hide anything, she couldn't. He was piercing through her eyes, her skin, any defence mechanism she thought she had.

Her mouth was twitching, her brow furrowed, her eyes looking up and down at him and Friske. She was wringing her hands in her lap, then touching her knees as if to steady them. He could hear her breathe, short and shallow breaths. She seemed close to hyperventilation.

Suddenly, her face was illuminated by a thought.

“You gave it to me! And it was useless piece of metal,” she shrugged her shoulders. “The Sci-Tech nurse could not use it. I left it there.”

He hesitated. Her facial expression looked too relaxed to be untruthful. She’d have to be a rather accomplished liar to fool him.

Without taking his eyes off her, he dialled the Sci-Tech lab. He got through on second attempt and received an out-of-office voice recording. The nurse was happy to inform all patients that she had been permanently seconded to the Vinadio Triage because of the unexpected increase in organ transplant operations.

“Damn,” he let out, slamming his screen. Friske’s smiling face made him even madder. He felt his blood boil in his veins. He lurched towards Alida’s backpack and pulled at it.

“The coin’s not registered on the system. What have you got in there?” he shouted.

“Let go of me, Dad, what’s wrong with you?!” she pushed him away, her face, flushed, her eyes an enormous question mark.

He took another shot at it, the vein in his neck swollen, and managed to grab her backpack and empty it on the table. A few trinkets fell out, slowly swirling, like snowflakes. A hair band, one of those stupid paper birds she was always making, a pair of climbing shoes, a worn-out rope and some bit of climbing equipment.

Friske looked on, amused.

Antonio rummaged through the objects, then picked up one shoe and threw it to the wall.

“What the hell is wrong with you? It’s a fucking coin. It didn’t work. Thanks for nothing, Dad!”

“I’m not your fucking Dad, ok? There,” he spat the words. He didn’t care anymore. If she didn’t have the coin, then who did?

“What?” The girl lost her balance and fell back into the armchair, as if hit with a bat over her head. She stared at him, blankly. “You’re kidding, right?” She knew him too well. That’s why she wasn’t smiling.

“Ask your mother,” he threw his hands in the air as he took his seat. Friske seemed thoroughly entertained. Bastard.

She started crying. There we go. The waterworks. Just started sobbing softly to make him feel bad. Was she putting on a show to hide something? If she took after her mother, she was certainly a great actress.

Finally, Friske intervened. “Dr Cuneese, are you quite OK this morning? I am satisfied that she stole nothing from you.” He helped to put the objects back in Alida’s backpack. When he was finished, she clutched it to her chest. “I am sure you will continue this delicate family discussion in other more private circumstances,” he spoke slowly. “But before you go, I’d like to tell you that I will be taking special care of Alida from now on. She’s due to report to the Triage Camp in Vinadio starting tomorrow. I’ll be following her progress every step of the way. She’s proved herself in this action against Bloody Brigades and I’m sure that will be only the first of many services she will perform for New Italy.” Friske was shaking her hand now, but it was visibly limp.

Friske. The nerve this guy had was unbelievable. Not only did he not kick her out of a job, he had decided to promote her. He would need to take it up with Il Principe. Antonio clutched the arms of the chair to suppress his desire to kick something.

“Il Principe will be coming to the opening of the Triage Camp in two days,” added Friske, as if reading his mind. “I would like to hereby extend our invitation to your Excellency as well. You’ll see how we’re making your vision into reality.”

“I shall be delighted, Commander Friske.” He managed an elegant acceptance. Alida was still sniffing. She didn’t look particularly happy with all this praise and

promotion. Never satisfied, these Juveniles. “Thank you for making time for this meeting. I’ll be on my way now. Antonio felt his artificial knees engage as he got to his feet, moved to the door with a gracious wave, and left the room, grinding his teeth all the way.

Chapter 14

Her father had shut the door with such force that Alida could still feel the vibration through her quivering body long after he was gone. What did he mean, not his daughter? Why had he summoned her to Friske's office at all? Had Otto confessed already? Was it just co-incidence that the Feds had raided the Chocolate Factory the minute she left it?

Friske seemed calm and in control as ever. At least someone acted as if they knew what they were doing. "So, Alida Cuneese. What about this coin?"

"What about it?" His skin was clammy, his gaze unflinching, trying to make her nervous. "Look, they shot me full of drugs, I was strapped to a bed, do you think I recall where that stupid coin is? The nurse had it. She said it wasn't compatible with their system. That's all I know. Scan me if you don't believe me. All I know is that I don't have it. I don't know where the coin is, and that's the truth. And I don't understand why you're all going crazy over the thing..."

"Ok, then. I believe you. I appreciate the truth from my agents." He started to shut down his devices, then began to shove things into a leather carrier.

There was something about the way he pronounced words that made her feel he meant the opposite. It was probably the way the corners of his mouth twitched after he finished talking. And that at any point he could take his words back.

In the meanwhile, she exhaled, relieved from the pressure of the interrogation. She put her backpack on, secured it to her back and neatened her uniform.

"So," he said, programming the geo-location on his wristband. "It's less than twenty minutes to Vinadio, eighteen degrees outside and a lovely Arte Povera Sky pattern. A perfect day for a road trip," he added with a smile.

His mood change was worrying. "Wonderful." What else to say.

They took the lift to the zip car dock together. When they reached cruising altitude, his body relaxed, his hand touching her forearm briefly. Here it comes.

“I think we should spend more time together. I want to get to know you better,” he said, trying to catch her eye. She looked straight ahead, over the Stura valley. Thirty kilometres were going to feel like a very long ride.

“You seem like such a promising young woman, so knowledgeable about Cultural Heritage,” he continued, undeterred. “You know, I’ve spent some time in the world of art myself.”

If she said anything, he’d take it as a green light. If she said nothing – well, he was her superior and that would be rude. Maybe record the conversation with her wristband – but that would be hostile. In the end she turned her face towards him but did not utter a word.

“I once worked in security for an art dealer in Rome,” he said. “One night, I think it was Christmas Eve, I ended up having to fight with the biggest art thief in Europe. Incredible guy. He’d been asked by a Russian banker to steal Modigliani’s *Reclining Nude with Blue Cushion* but we had hacked all his communications and we were on to him.”

“How interesting.” Did he expect her to believe all this?

“That’s how I got this scar,” he added, pointing a gloved finger to the puckered skin on his neck.

“Did you arrest him?” she asked. He didn’t answer. The silence was leaden between them.

“I am sure you will like your work at Vinadio. Are you excited?” he changed the subject. There was no avoiding the conversation now.

“I’m looking forward to seeing the fortress,” she said. Keep it neutral. “I read about it when I took a course in military architecture. A miracle of nineteenth-century Italian

engineering. And such an elegant, functional layout. Although, to be honest, I always wondered about the soldiers. Ten kilometres of internal paths on three levels are quite a challenging set up for personnel. Is it all in use by the Triage Camp now?”

“Yes, since your Father’s...” he stopped himself. “I’m sorry, since the Full Foreclosure programme was enacted, the Fronte Superiore has been expanded into a Spa, to offer a comfortable waiting experience to the Gerontocrats on their transplant journey. I believe they’ve installed sun decks and outdoor pools on the upper levels.”

“What about the two other floors?” She tried to recall as much as she could from her brief encounter with the nineteenth-century building during her Masters. Thick, concrete walls with wide arches that four thousand workers built brick by brick for eleven years in the early eighteen-hundreds on the order of King Alberto of Sardinia. To think that the whole fortification was barely used over a three-hundred-year period, until the Gerontocrats took it over.

“The Fronte Inferiore is where all the Juveniles in Triage are, and as you would expect, the Fronte d’Attaco is where all our offices and labs are located. They have probably already set up your office, so you’ll find yourself at home in no time.” He was still trying to get eye contact. The creep.

As he spoke, she had a vision of the Titanic, with the poor crammed into the lower decks and the rich making merry above them, and Friske as the Captain. Maybe Il Principe’s visit looming in the distance like the iceberg.

“I see, it makes sense” she said, her thoughts unable to settle on anything she wanted to talk about. Her eyes glazed over the Italian Occitanie scenery that they were now flying over. Aware of her mono-syllabic conversation, she knew she had to snap out of it. She rubbed her temples and forehead, trying to energise her thoughts.

Friske reached out, touching her forearm again: “Don’t let what your father said get to you,” he said in a soothing voice. He must think she was worried about it. “He’s

under a lot of pressure right now. I heard things aren't going well at home – you've been on the mission; you may not know. Not for me to tell you, of course. But it sounds like there's been some argument with your mother. Every marriage has its ups and downs."

He sounded like an uncle. Like he was on her side. She decided to take advantage.

"Do you think I could test my DNA at the Triage lab?" she turned to him, her face the pure picture of sweetness and defencelessness. "I could put his mind at rest, couldn't I?"

"Of course you can," he replied so fast, it took her by surprise. "I can ask them to fast track the results. Very thoughtful of you. Like a good daughter."

Creepy, creepy, creepy.

On the horizon, the dark Lego-like squares of the Forte di Vinadio came into view. The fortress was like crown lying above the velvety green borders of the town. The Stura river sparkled in the morning light as if it was studded with diamonds.

The Entry Guards, located along the Colle della Maddalena drawbridge, saluted them smartly, no doubt recognising Friske's car distinctive shape and coding. One of them approached respectfully and asked Friske to pull up close to the main building wall, where he initiated the routine screening.

Looking outside the window, Alida could see the extent of the Triage Complex. The place was teeming with people. On the upper levels, she could distinguish white-clad attendants, zig-zagging among cheering Gerontocrats, while volleyballs and netballs appeared in the air above their heads.

She asked Friske for permission to get out of the car while the screening was done. From the bridge wall she looked down into the main courtyard. A shuttlecock flew in her direction from the upper terrace, followed by a quavering voice calling out

an apology. She held out her hand to catch it, then suddenly it seemed to change its mind and decided to swirl downwards. Her eyes were drawn to a dirty Kamaz truck that had just made an entrance in the inner courtyard. It was surrounded by armed guards and dogs. There was commotion around the truck. She held her breath.

Friske also got out of the car and was now standing next to her. He held his wrist towards the courtyard, reading the incoming data. When the guards opened the doors of the Kamaz, out fell bodies. Swiftly the guards moved in to sort them. Live ones in one pile, dead ones on another. The truck kept spewing bodies. The heavy smell of death rose to their level. She could see Friske looking at her. Her eyes were glued to the scene.

The live arrivals staggered to their feet, seeming dazed and weak. A dishevelled woman, clutching a teddy bear to her chest, kept turning around and shouting “Are we there yet? Have I made it yet?” One man threw himself at one guard, “I demand my rights.” They were both pushed back by the dog handlers.

“What is this? What’s going on?” she asked Friske, trying not to show emotion.

“This is Lot number 2013,” he said, reading his device. “Let’s get inside. You will see in a minute.” He put his hands on her shoulders, pushing her gently but firmly into the car. She felt like she was on automatic pilot, but the smell was making her feel sick. Get a grip. Act like all of this was normal. She closed her eyes and took a deep breath.

She could see now with her own eyes how the new Foreclosure process was working.

“Yes, why not?” She turned to Friske, trying to look cheerful.

With the car cleared and parked, they got out and entered the building on the ground floor, known as Fronte d’Attaco. The space, intended to be the site of fierce fighting by the garrison, was now a warehouse-like expanse divided into offices. Her

own space was a square cubicle with artificial light, next to Friske's large, oval room. It had splendid views towards the hermitage of Sant'Anna di Vinadio, whose lonely tower was reigning supreme over the fort from its altitude of two thousand metres.

After a hologram introduction to the Triage Complex, she was given her security code and the geo-location of the areas she was to inspect during her work shift. A fresh white uniform was waiting for her. By the time she finished donning the white bonnet, the stretchy white leggings, the gloves and the hoodie, she looked like a mix between a Nordic skier and a nurse. A ridiculous sight, but she had to admit that it was comfortable.

From her office she went out into the hallway, then knocked at Friske's door.

"Come in, I was expecting you. Are you ready for your first site inspection? I am going to come with you, just this once." He was fumbling through his pouch, his eyes set on her. Behind him, the splendid valley. To his right, a wall-to-wall projection of the internal courtyard, where the truck had gone, the live arrivals were being formed up into a marching column and the dead lay without dignity where the guards had thrown the bodies.

Alida's heart sank. Fear and despair gripped her insides. The new Foreclosure was real and it was happening. Otto had been right, but where was he? No hope of halting the massacre of a generation now. What could she do? Nothing but what Friske told her, until there was opportunity to escape. Despair for her friends. Confusion. Then determination, born at the crossroads of despair and fear, to keep her eyes open. There must be a way out. She traced the sign of the cross on the roof of her mouth with her tongue, then entered the room. The projection on the wall, opposite the entrance showed the scene of an execution. She could recognise the four Blue Hairs: Otto, Frieda, Geeta and Soso. They were suspended from the scaffold gallows upside down, hanging by their ankles in the middle of the courtyard. Her stomach turned over.

“Look at your work,” Friske said enthusiastically.

A large group of Juveniles were gathered around the victims. Looking closely, she saw that they were still alive. Eyes open, occasional spasms shaking their bodies. They had been there for a while, though, because they were not fighting anymore.

“How long have they been like that?” she asked, mastering her voice.

“Three to four hours I’m told. The guards wanted to make an example. Great entertainment for the others— look at them,” he said, zooming in on the Juvenile’s faces. Which were anything but entertained. Those that had steeled themselves to look were unsmiling. Some seemed grimly unmoved, others turned away.

“Forgive me for offering my advice to a Commander, but isn’t there a danger that we’ll turn them into martyrs?” She tried to sound genuinely worried. “Isn’t it better if the Juveniles are allowed to believe they’re not in any danger? With Il Principe’s arrival tomorrow, the last thing you want is an escape attempt or a radicalisation event, surely?”

He shifted his weight from one foot to another and managed a “Hmm.” Strike while the iron is hot. “From what I know they’re no threat in this situation. You could simply treat them like the rest, allow them to mingle with the others freely.” She could feel him listening. “Then everyone will see them for what they are: helpless failures, like the rest of them. For all their elitist belief that they are so much more intelligent.” She looked dismissively towards the Juveniles gathered around the scaffold, disdain loaded into her voice. She was starting to get the hang of this.

Friske took his time, then agreed “You’ve good a point. Smart.” He dialled someone and ordered their release and assignment to cells in the Fronte Inferiore, with free movement in the Juvenile area.

She watched the orders carried out from the office window. A squad of guard appeared, pushed the Juveniles aside and the four were lowered to the ground, put on

stretchers and taken away. A nurse scuttled forwards and started taking pulses, ostentatiously. Their bodies seemed limp, as if their joints had been dislocated. Act calm. Act normal. Do not let him see you're angry. Friske was also watching, positioned slightly behind her. She could feel his eyes following the line of her face.

“I do want the best possible launch when Il Principe is here. We can save the execution until tomorrow. Hang them then.” Alida gulped. She may have won the prisoners twenty-four hours, but Friske seemed intent on a public execution.

Otto must be suffering right now, she thought. After such treatment, his body must be in terrible pain, his joints sprained, his head pounding with increased blood pressure. Maybe the nurse had painkillers. In the meantime, she needed to accompany Friske on their first site inspection.

He led the way into a narrow and low-ceilinged corridor, which ended abruptly with a door disguised as a wall. He swiped his wrist along the code lock and the wall slid to one side. They entered an overcrowded room. A few hundred people were seated alongside a T-shaped stage, like a catwalk.

The auctioneer, standing behind a lectern, called out “Lot number 2013” and invited someone from backstage to come forward. About twenty men and women made an entrance, one behind another. They were naked.

“Welcome to the market.” Friske seemed proud of the procedure.

“First lot, a college-educated Albanian,” the auctioneer's voice scratched the surface of the air. “She majored in art history, minored in archaeology and speaks perfect Italian. Very fine hair.” And he gestured to the porters, who showed off her long dark curls, pulled them out so the buyers could see their glossy thickness. He showed her hair off, curly and black, snaking down to her waist. The buyers in the front row, all men, nodded appreciatively and made notes.

“Starting price is sixty thousand, ladies and gentlemen. A fine, healthy specimen, as you can see.”

“What is this?” inquired Alida. “A slave market.”

“Not exactly. It’s a way of cleaning up our country, first of all. With Full Foreclosure we can finally extract all non-native Italians out of the economy. We’ve just done a raid, and these are the first incoming lots,” he pointed his finger at the figures on the stage.

“I...don’t understand how this works,” she shook her head. A million thoughts swirling in her head. Migrants had become part of the fabric of New Italy. Everyone was a migrant. Marcia, her father’s aide, Miranda, her mother’s help. Even her father, the Southerner. It was like trying to unpick the threads of a carpet. This was going to ruin the country. This was going to ruin a lot of lives.

“We’ve stopped this nonsense of in and out with the Killing Fields. We looked at a points system for people already working here, but it wasn’t really feasible. But we still have a lot of foreigners in our society. You can never be certain of their allegiances. Plus, aesthetically, they just don’t fit. Too dark, not really European, most of them. Our Piemontese stock should be prioritised, don’t you think?”

The auctioneer was looking eagerly at the buyers, who were taking images with their wristbands, sending them through to their business owners and receiving incoming bids that they communicated to the auctioneer in real time.

A buyer was complaining. “That one’s got damage – look at her ankle.”

“Superficial – take a closer look,” the auctioneer replied, waving to the porter to make the woman run, which she did awkwardly, holding her breasts with her hands to stop them moving.

“But they contribute to the society,” she said, “they’re integrated, they’re just like us,” she insisted. “Why are you taking them out of productive life?”

Friske looked at her sternly. He didn't seem to appreciate being put on the spot, especially since he seemed to enjoy the spectacle. His eyes were glued to the woman's body as she slowed down to a walk and let go of her breasts.

"To create jobs for rightfully entitled Juveniles, my dear. Like you. Don't you remember how difficult it was for you to obtain a job?"

His 'my dear' filled her mouth with bile. She sensed the last sentence was infused with just a dash of threat so she decided to get off the moral high ground. She nodded. He did have a point.

"Plus they will still be productive — their contribution to the organ industry is extraordinary. Of course, lower-quality organs, but that's reflected in the price, and variety is paramount in a free market — prices for every pocket. We can sell to the developing world if we can market an economy range." And he rubbed his fingers together.

She was going to ask for more details about organ harvesting when a middle-aged body attracted her gaze. It couldn't be. And then the woman turned around and started marching towards them. Her dark skinned, round-shaped body was familiar. This was not just anyone.

The auctioneer listed her credentials. PhD in Child Development. Cuban. Experienced in child rearing and parental surrogacy. Miranda. Her childhood nanny, the mainstay of the Cuneese family, the woman who'd made her home a haven for most of her life. Her mother could not get out of bed without Miranda.

"Ola Signora, what are you doing lying on the bed, chop chop, we need to get going, breakfast on its way." That was the refrain she heard ever single morning from her bedroom. Every single morning for over twenty years. Miranda had raised her like her own daughter. As a matter of fact, she was more of a mother to her than Camilla ever was.

She would bring sunshine into the house with her funny turns of phrase: “Look at the sky, it’s the colour of mouse shit, what a disaster, Signorina,” she would tell her in the mornings, pulling back the curtains. It was indeed the colour of mouse shit. Only the Ministry gave it a fancy name like Warm Earth.

Alida felt dizzy, as if the earth was turning and turning around her. They were actually going to sell Miranda. Her feet were on the ground though. Her hands balled into fists, her teeth clenched. But she couldn’t get herself to say a word. Not a word. Shame and anger descended upon her like a veil of darkness.

Of course, the first thought that came to her mind was that she was there to help rescue the Juveniles of New Italy and fight against the Gerontocrats, but she couldn’t help everyone. In fact, at that moment, she could hardly save her own life. For all the selfless dedication that this woman had had for her and her family, she was going to die now in front of her eyes, and there was nothing she could do.

Guilt started gnawing at her heart.

When she approached the end of the catwalk, the moment she’d dreaded arrived. Miranda looked at her. Her lips parted, recognising her. Alida felt daggers through her heart. She crossed herself with the tongue inside her closed mouth. Catholic Miranda would have appreciated that. Before Miranda turned around, her lips mouthed “I forgive you, Signorina,” just for her to see. It felt worse than a slap in the face.

In many ways, this felt like the Fire Rescue experiment she was tested on during her interview. When she was asked which of her loved ones she would rescue from the fire. She was relieved that moment and she couldn’t get herself to do anything. She stood there, petrified and ashamed.

Friske’s voice came through to her as if from another dimension: “Are you ok? I think you need some air,” he pushed her gently out of the room.

She breathed in and out rapidly, her head dizzy, her vision blurry. “I can’t get my breath. There’s no air in here.” She managed to get the words out, leaning against the corridor wall.

“No sense of hygiene, those foreigners. We should bring them up to standard before a sale. I’ll have a word with the auctioneer afterwards,” he said. “Selling them in that state isn’t unacceptable,” he added.

It all seemed like such a trifle. Hygiene Imperative.

“I’d like you to move now to the Spa area.” He put a hand under her elbow to steer her out of the room and along the corridor. Her wristband flashed and the updated directions for the day flashed. “I’ll see you at the end of your shift.” He said gently, then walked away from her with a spring in his step.

Alida wanted to sink to the ground, rest her forehead on her knees, curl up in a child’s pose. She couldn’t unsee what she had just seen. How was it possible that the woman had raised her had ended up in a human auction, a lot in a slave market. Why hadn’t Antonio and Camilla taken care of her?

She felt disoriented and cowardly. Her wristband started buzzing. She was late for her visit on the top floor, the Spa area in the Fronte Superiore. The Fortress was a vast mass of stone, built to house an army, and it seemed that the government had not been able to install zip rails and chairlifts. Running and climbing were the only way to go about. She followed the directions for about a kilometre, through long corridors marked with archways every fifty metres. She passed by people in white uniforms, just like her, buzzing, moving with precise gestures on pre-planned routes, same as her. But she couldn’t see any faces. Her vision was still blurred. She blinked and realised that there were still tears in her eyes.

Finally, she was directed to a staircase, a massive spiral of stone treads, cold beneath her feet. She counted out loud, fifty steps, and stopped, her breath taken away.

Barring her way was a reinforced glass wall, presumably installed to separate the lower floor, inhabited by guards, Juveniles, interns and the foreign “merchandise,” from what lay in front of her, the Spa, intended to be paradise as far as the eye could see.

There was a door and she swiped herself inside.

At the head of the stairs she emerged into the pool area. It was bathed in brilliant sunshine, softly warm, created by a specially programmed dome in the Security Sky. The stone under her feet gave way to pale polished marble. What had once been the military parade ground now held a series of pools, linked like a string of pearls, surrounded by cushioned loungers and flanked by a bar area under a white canopy. Soft music was playing in the background. The attendants, young men with all the muscle definition a steroid programme could buy, moved about with piles of white towels, trays of drinks and giant fans which they offered to the clientele. The Gerontocrat ladies reclined on loungers, chatting and drinking sparkling wine, happy to know that all ultra-violet rays had been removed from the sunlight.

According to her geo-location tracker, beyond the pool area there lay the sports fields, the massage parlours and spa treatment areas and further, at the farthest end, there were the cosmetic surgery operating rooms. The general operating suites seemed to be down in the floor below. The storeys seemed to be cleverly connected with the harvesting area on the lower ground, where the Juveniles were. The ‘heavy’ operating rooms on the middle floor, where the offices were located and the ‘lighter’ operating areas were on the top floor. The harvesting and operating rooms were all connected through a vertical conveyor belt system. The waste management system seemed to connect to the river, suggesting that what remained of the human resources was processed into biodegradable waste and carried downstream, from Stura to the Tanaro, from the Tanaro to the Po’ and from the Po’ through the Lombardic plain all the way to

the Adriatic Sea near Venice. Where the gondolas floated on lagoons of waste human tissue. She shuddered inwardly.

The clientele had not noticed her. The Gerontocrats were having fun, comparing their procedures, making each other jealous. My dermal renewal is peachier than yours, my stem cell filler trumps your scalp regeneration, I'll see your titanium phalangeal replacements and raise you a corneal micro-graft. Men and women yelling like teenagers, flashing their perfect white teeth.

Everything was blindingly white. The furniture, the cutlery, their bathing suits. Even the blood had been made colourless, as the nearest of the women proudly explained when she revealed her almost invisible scars from what she called a vein weaving in her sculptured calves. Oxygen on tap. Blood on tap. Mix them in a cocktail as you please. Purity. Power. Exclusive access. As she passed them, she smiled and said good morning like a well-trained officer of the government, but they looked through her. She was just a servant for them, obviously. What was she thinking? She was one of them as long as she was part of her family. Right now, she was on her own. Making a living. They were made of money. She was there because they paid for it.

She bowed her head and pressed forward, ready to move on to the next target, the Hero Wall on the lower ground floor, when she heard a familiar sound. The clatter and chatter of her mother's tea parties. Her voice. Camilla's unmistakable haughty voice.

"Can we do something about the temperature? We're freezing here." The familiar rack of ribs that was her mother's back, the knife-sharp shoulder blades almost vibrating as she started laughing at something a wrinkled tortoise of a man beside her had just said. And there on either side were Debora and Alice, her mother's closest friends. The smiles disappeared from their faces when they saw her.

At the sight of a white uniform, Camilla said, "Finally. Service at last."

“Hello, Mother,” Alida said. Camilla’s glass fell to the ground. Seeing her mother’s face, embarrassed that her daughter made an appearance, made Alida feel slightly better.

“Excuse me,” said Camilla. “Alida? What are you doing here?”

“I’m at work, Mother. You remember, I got a job.”

“How ghastly, dear — is this where your job is? I thought you worked in an office.”

“My office is downstairs. My boss has sent me up here to get oriented. Such a surprise to find you here. But I need to talk to you about ...”

“Oh, I can’t have any stress now, darling. Doctor’s orders.” She was slurring her words. Did they give them some kind of pre-med in the cocktails?

“Mother, listen, this is important. I’ve just seen Miranda. Do you realise she’s here? It’s terrible, we’ve got to do something. She’d been swept up in some kind of drive to deport foreigners, only they’re not repatriated, they’re sold as medical resources. Our Miranda is right here, in the Fortress, being sold to the highest bidder - just as a body. We must stop it.”

But her mother didn’t seem horrified. She was looking slightly embarrassed, as if she’d just realised she had lipstick on her teeth. “Oh darling, don’t get all sentimental about it. I needed some extra cash. You know your Father cut me off because of the divorce. I have expenses. And these procedures are so expensive. I know you’ll understand. It’s not my fault your father’s addicted to young flesh, after all.”

What? Her mother had just acknowledged turning in a woman so devoted she was like family, condemning her to a revolting, humiliating death - and all for a bit of cash. Alida was at a loss. It seemed her father was trying to deny that he was her father. Maybe Camilla wasn’t her mother either. Maybe she could declare herself an orphan.

“What’s the matter with you?” The rest of the circle were gawping at her as if this was some kind of performance art, some artistic intervention staged for their

amusement. “You and Dad had a row, this much is obvious. He’s going round town telling everyone I’m not his daughter, and now you’re trying to sell off the only woman you can trust in this world as a living organ bank. How much is a conscience transplant? That’s the only procedure you need.”

She’d raised her voice and taken hold of her mother’s stick-like arm to shake it. From the corners of her eyes she saw attendants looking in her direction, waiting for a sign of distress from Camilla. If she made a scene Friske would get suspicious, put her under guard even. Then it would be game-over.

“Stop it, darling. You’re hurting me. You don’t know what you’re talking about.” Camilla pulled her arm away and Alida let go. “Your father has been very cruel.” Camilla’s head was flopping forward as if it she didn’t have spine. “I wanted to hurt him, that’s all. You can understand, darling. But you are a strange child. Like making all this fuss about Miranda. She’s only a foreigner. She knew her time would be up one day. You know, sometimes I wonder why you turned out to be so weird.”

“Are we all good here? Anything I can help you with?” One of the attendants was approaching. Alida brushed him off with a ‘stay-out-of-this’ look.

She has had enough. Camilla was clearly under the influence of something and wasn’t going to be any use. Anger was boiling inside her. Anger towards both of her parents.

“I think my mother isn’t feeling very well. She doesn’t seem to be quite herself. I’ve got to get back to my office now but I’d be so grateful if you could keep an eye on her for a while.” And the young man said, “Sure thing, absolutely, my pleasure,” and bustled around them collecting glasses and adjusting the fans. Camilla sank back on her lounge and closed her eyes. Alida patted her arm before she left.

She didn’t have high expectations of the Hero Wall. It was probably going to be another propaganda display of who did what when, who deserved credit, according to

someone's criteria that she may or may not share. New Italy. All these years she'd believed. She had no illusions, when the truth was she had never understood the nightmare in which she was living. She could have worked it out, if she'd really cared, and the truth was she hadn't cared. They were right to call her "Princess." Privilege had blinded her. Comfort had made her deaf. But now, she really cared. Kind of. Because, what could she do? The contrast between Miranda's dire situation and her mother's carefree attitude made her see the injustice. It's one thing to know it, intellectually, and to 'kind of' care about it. Because let's face it, she mostly 'kind of' cared... She didn't do anything. Couldn't do anything. And yet, she was a good person - wasn't she?

The Hero Wall turned out to be a vast visual display on the second floor, in the Juveniles' area. It was, she quickly realised, a shop window where Juveniles who had just been foreclosed were showcased on individual screens. There was a little bio, with an interactive summary of life achievements at the bottom and a 3D image album. There was an option to get your own photo taken with the Hero of the Day. From afar, it looked like a constellation of healthy bodies interconnected in a glowing social network.

From up close, she noticed the tubes coming out of their bodies, linking circuits full of nodes bathed with human blood to test the viability of the organs for transplant. If you were interested in that girl's beautiful hair or that boy's perfect retinas, you put your hand on the screen and the Wall performed an analysis. There were sophisticated algorithms calculating, in real time, the estimated success of the transplant, matching tissue information and blood types.

As for the Juveniles themselves, well, it looked as if they were being bled to death. Slowly. Harvesting blood was obviously an important part of the programme. Of course, whatever procedure the surgeons performed, they would need blood for. So each Juvenile was attached to different coloured tubes that collected the fresh blood into IV bags that fell on conveyor belts and were transported upwards towards the Spa area.

Some were marked as ‘Virgin blood’. What were the Gerontocrats doing - bathing Borgia-style?

She had a metallic taste in her mouth as she walked along the wall, reading names, looking at smiling pictures. Rarely did she get herself to actually look up at the moribund Juveniles. The majority had their eyes closed, in torpor. Some closer to death than others.

After a while she started to get used to seeing this. She stopped from time to time to read the bios. Ordinary Juveniles. With ordinary degrees. With ordinary jobs. And yet they had been foreclosed. The new Foreclosure process, annihilating the new generation to keep the old alive. The elaborate scientific machinery behind this was astounding. She felt overwhelmed. And then she felt like an electric shock had just gone through her body, from her top of her head to her toes. She read the bio again and again. Her eyelids were leaden. She couldn’t get herself to raise them to check whether the name was correct.

And when she did, the body opened his eyes and looked right at her, and she let out a scream.

Marco’s face was like parchment, his eyes pleading. And below, his body, the body of New Italy’s poster boy with his firm muscles pulsing with health, lay limp and helpless on the surgical bed.

She pounded the screen where her former fiancé was pinned like an insect and being bled to death. Her insides were churning, her head exploding.

“Marco! Marco! What are you doing here?” She shouted but she was not sure he could hear her. Where the hell were the bodies? The images were so life-like they seemed to be just the other side of a window. Could he hear her? Her breath steamed the screen and she wrote in it the same words. And then he spoke and strangely enough his voice came through.

“Full Foreclosure,” he said with difficulty, his mouth drooling saliva. “This is what it looks like. They come after everyone now,” he added, then paused for breath. Then, he looked her in the eyes: “Because you didn’t marry me, I didn’t have your name’s protection anymore, though I had a job.”

If she could make herself disappear, she would have.

She couldn’t understand. It didn’t make any sense. But he was there, in front of her, being bled to death while being labelled a hero. What a difference a day makes. The day before he had been New Italy’s favourite son, he was proposing to her. A day later, he was being killed in front of her. She stood there. Like a statue.

He managed a smile. Sardonic of course. Then his voice emerged from his gut, raspy, deep and desperate: “Can you kill me, Alida? Please kill me. You don’t know what this is like, Alida. You can’t imagine. But you’ll be next. If I wasn’t safe, you won’t be either. You will wish someone would take pity on you and kill you.”

She burst into tears. Stunned, helpless, in shock. She ran away. She didn’t stop until she reached a quiet corner where she finally vomited. She held her own head as she retched her guts out. Tears covered her cheeks.

Now, here she was, confronted with someone in utter despair, real despair, someone she held dearly — maybe didn’t love but somehow now that made it worse— but still, shared a life with for three years, and she could do nothing. Felt like she couldn’t do anything. There were no prizes for being human. But turning her head away felt like she wasn’t worthy of the name. She stood there, with her head in her palms for a long time.

It was time to find out what she was made of.

She sent a quick message to Friske. “Tour completed, most impressive. Request access to lab to test DNA.” She waited online, and after a few seconds she received “Approved,” so she immediately booked a spot in the lab in the Fronte d’Attaco.

Directed by her wristband, she found the lab at the end of a long corridor, passing the 'heavy' operation rooms teeming with figures in surgical gowns and masks. Then, glancing down a side corridor, she noticed a pile of familiar clothes on the floor outside a door. Otto's military holdall and tech shoes. Nobody was watching. She stepped into the corridor, pushed open the door marked "Prep" and entered. In the quiet room, four figures lay naked under fine sterile sheets, lay strapped to beds. IV lines, monitors. Their heads were covered in surgical caps and at first she didn't recognise them. Then she realised she was looking at Geeta's upturned nose. Soso's profile, the picture of relaxation still. Otto, with grey circles under his eyes. The leaders of the Bloody Brigades, all of them.

A nurse entered from another room, with a tray filled with drug containers and instruments. A strong smell of surgical antiseptic invaded the room when she unscrewed a jar on the table closest to her.

"Are you here to help with the stitching?" Without waiting for an answer, she pushed a kidney bowl containing tubes of dermal adhesive towards her on a smaller tray, and threw some pincers into it. "You can start with the one next to you. Don't forget to tag the timing of what you're doing. We don't want to waste our supplies."

"I am a trainee on my first day. Commander Friske has asked me to familiarise myself with the whole facility. I haven't been trained for this. Would it be appropriate if I watched, though? I'm anxious to learn as much as I can about the procedures."

"Well, the first thing to learn is our staffing levels aren't high enough and I really was hoping for an extra pair of hands." The nurse spoke with resigned cynicism and took back the bowl of adhesive. Soso was the patient nearest to her. He seemed sedated, his body didn't respond at all to the nurse's movements as she pulled back the sheet and began to swab a neat red incision just under his ribs. The nurse was intent on her task.

Alida looked around to the others. Geeta and Otto seemed awake. Otto's eyes were begging her to do something.

Alida turned to the nurse. She bent over Soso's body to have a closer look at what the nurse is doing, "You are such an expert," she said, before turning around and knocking over the tray of instruments. "Oh my goodness, I'm such a klutz. Honestly, I didn't mean to be such a nuisance." And she fell to the floor and started to pick things up, scattering them more widely in the process. "I'm sorry, you won't tell, will you? It's my first day."

The woman didn't say anything. She just shook her head and pursed her lips, holding back. The name of Friske clearly carried some weight. "No harm done. But I need sterilised equipment. Best to start again." She picked up the tray and left the room.

Otto seemed to be watching although his eyes were almost closed and he lay without moving. She went to his side and touched his cheek. "Can you hear me? Are you awake?"

"Alida, I knew you'd be here somewhere. How the hell did you find us? Thank God." Slowly, slowly, as if he was very tired or very drunk, his eyes opened and he looked at her with what might be have been affection.

"We don't have much time," she warned him. "I'm Friske's agent, he's watching me. I can't bear seeing you like this. And Marco, did you know they've got Marco too? We've got to stop this. I don't care what it takes. Just hang in there, don't die on me. There must be a way to get out here. We need to climb Cervino together, ok?"

"You need to be careful, Princess. You remember Giorgio, your Father's aide? He told me about the Full Foreclosure plan. He was one of our embedded agents. But they found out, or maybe he got scared, because he disappeared. Before he could get us any evidence. So when I heard your father had called for you, at the Chocolate Factory,

I knew he was on to us. That's why I had to call the Feds, to get in here — this is the heart of the programme." He choked and started to cough.

"So *you* called the Feds? You turned yourselves in? You are crazy, you always were!" she smiled. What about Clarissa and Proctor, are they on the outside? Can we call on them?" Her mind was working in overdrive.

"Yes, they are on standby when we need them to extract us," he whispered.

The door swished and the nurse returned. Alida pretended to secure Otto's straps.

"This one just moved. I thought maybe the restraints had come loose."

"They do that sometimes. Patients are sedated, of course, but they still make involuntary movements. Good thing you did that. If one of them falls off when I'm on my own I have to call the porters to get them back on the bed. This really is a two-person job." The nurse took her second tray with stitching liquid and started prepping Frieda. As soon as the nurse's back was turned, she programmed her wristband to buzz. Then she looked very concerned upon reading the message and said out loud:

"Sorry, I need to run to a very important meeting. Thank you so much for letting me observe you, I'm sure it will be valuable to know how you work here. I won't forget that you need more help, trust me. See you later."

Frieda lay face down, and the nurse was working on an incision near her spine. She did not look up.

The DNA lab was quiet, despite the fact that she was told she needed to book a place at all times. There was one other guy in one corner, he seemed to be typing frantically, eyes fixed on this screen, with headphones on. He never even looked up when she entered. She chose the furthestmost screen from the entry door, just in case anyone came in.

Otto's face stuck in her mind. He looked tired, so much older, but more than anything, he looked like a mature man, responsibilities weighing him down. Today, she

didn't feel like questioning him anymore. Everything that had gone on before was like a silly game played by children.

Her feet felt numb, her chest stiff from all the stress. She decided to do a little session of stretching before beginning, as to activate the blood at the periphery of her limbs. She missed running. Her oxygenation level was sub-optimal.

She finally sat down, pulled the chair closer to the desk and turned the screen on. She logged onto the system with her authorisation code. It went smoothly. Her own personal page booted, waiting for her to search, decode or analyse any type of data.

First things first. Before asking for a DNA test, she looked around carefully, to make sure no one was looking. She then pulled open her backpack, slowly extracted the origami from it and placed it on the desk. The coin, the coin that hadn't worked in the Sci-Tech lab. That was the key to this somehow. With very careful movements of her nails, she extracted the coin and put it on the desk, taking care not to make a noise with the disc of metal. She looked at it in the light of the screen — a tiny piece, a lot of expectations. Come on, make my day. She slid it in the reader and waited for the files to boot.

She didn't know what to look for in the list of files in front of her. There were hundreds of zip folders, all numbered, all with different levels of encryption. She puzzled over them. She didn't know where to start. She could use a whizz kid like Proctor at that point. But she had no one but herself. Unless she dared to ask the loner genius in the corner who was rocking his head to some kind of apocalyptic song. Ok, Alida, think.

She thought back to the moment before her father gave her the coin. He was getting ready for a meeting. He made the phone call to Friske. Had he uploaded the vaccine code onto the coin while he was doing all that? So maybe he made a mistake. Maybe he had copied his presentation files onto her coin. So he ended up making an

exact replica of the Full Foreclosure plan and giving it to her. Maybe all their dreams would come true. Maybe pigs could fly. It was possible, of course, but nobody was that lucky. But since she was supposed to open the Sci-Tech vaccine code with her wristband, maybe that would open whatever else was on the disc. She took a deep breath. Swipe wrist. Nothing happened. Her heart sank. She tried to open individual folders. The screen filled with symbols, numbers, gibberish. Her pulse was racing. Come on. Think.

“Are you ok?” the voice of the headphone guy startled her. He was chewing gum and he had a large smile and a T-shirt that said “Maintenance.”

“I’m fine,” she said automatically.

He stood there, shifting his weight from one leg to another.

“I’m just trying to get these files open. Do you know how I upload my wrist code to this screen? I’m trying to swipe it in the machine, but maybe it’s a newer version?” Judging by the look in his eyes, she realised she sounded like a noob.

“You’re not doing anything wrong,” he drew out his words.

Great. Darn it, what now?

“It’s that the screen you’re working on is broken. Everyone goes to it because it’s the furthest from the door and the boss can’t see what you’re doing, but actually it’s pretty much fucked. You should use another one that has wrist-reading facilities”

Was it going to be that simple? He’d hardly finished speaking when she had already moved screens and started to upload from the coin.

“You’ve saved my life!” She decided to play the princess card again. “I’ve got to review all these files and I didn’t dare say I couldn’t open them. But look, here’s the thing. They’re really confidential and I...”

“No worries. I was about finished anyway.” He was smiling at her ditziness and moving towards the door.

“You really have been an absolute pleasure to work with. I do hope we get to meet again.” She shook his hand and leaned towards him. He clutched his headphones to his chest as he shouldered out of the door. It had a lock. She used it.

The code worked. The Master Plan was there in front of her, black on white, her father’s name written at the top. First, she watched his presentation prepared for the Council Elders. The way he spun the story to make it look inevitable that the Juveniles needed to be ‘managed,’ ‘organised,’ ‘made productive’.

She didn’t know how much time had elapsed. She had been all alone in a room without natural lighting and without any markers for changes in temperature and light and without any human presence signalling distress about hunger or thirst. She may have been there for hours. She realised she didn’t have a lot of time so she scrolled fast, skimming the content.

There were databases included, working files with names, action plans. Who was going to be taken and when. How the Triage Camps were going to be used. How the organs were going to be processed, sold, packaged. How the foreigners were going to be exterminated. How New Italy was going to be filthy rich. Filthy. At the expense of her young. Her future.

All the information the world needed to know and the complete proof that her father was New Italy’s Minister for Generational Genocide, all there. At her fingertips. Only a monster could have conceived this. If that man wasn’t her father, so much the better. She saved the decrypted data back on the coin, hid it in the origami drone and tucked it inside her bra, close to her heart.

She logged back into the lab system and requested a DNA test. The kit was promptly delivered to her screen and a hologram helped her swab her mouth and give a speck of blood. The screen flashed. Results in one day. And then her wristband started the count down.

For the first time that day, she breathed out, relaxing her diaphragm. She closed her eyes. Before she could replay the events of the past few hours, a jarring noise brought her back to her senses.

The wall in front of her had lit up, and Friske's face was projected on it. He looked at her with a slightly concerned face. She clenched her fists under the desk, then placed her palms on it, pressing down.

"I need to see you in my office, now," he said. Then the screen switched off. Her heart started racing.

Chapter 15

Her earpiece had kept buzzing since she'd wailed at the Hero Wall. The "hygiene imperative" message was going on loop, reminding her that her tear-stained clothes were unfit for a Juvenile. She slapped it and wiggled it, shook her head, popped her ears but nothing worked. It was uncomfortable, to say the least. But best to change before she made Friske suspicious. She looked for her room on the geo-map. It was located between the lab and Friske's office, which was at the end of the corridor next to the entrance into the building and beyond the generous antechamber.

She swiped herself into what looked like a wardrobe with a single bed in the middle. There were no decorations. The light came on when she entered the room and kept dimming as she stopped moving. In the wall-to-wall, metre-long wardrobe was exactly the same uniform she had on. Fresh pairs of barefoot rubber shoes were lined underneath.

She didn't have time for a shower, so she put on the crisp white silicone uniform and pressed it against the sweat film that covered her body. She dumped her old uniform in a box labelled "biohazard." As she did so, she touched her chest to make sure the origami drone was still safely tucked away. The old clothes were churned in a second with a sucking noise.

As the soft fabric of the uniform touched her skin, she felt a sense of belonging to the Triage system. Outside, she was one of them—the oppressors . . . the predators. Shivers went down her spine. Inside, she was one of the others— a human bio-resource that could be churned by the system like discarded old clothes.

The door to Friske's office was ajar. She went in, taking small steps, careful to spot any sign that she was going to be captured by Feds lurking in the shadows. Had that worried spotty teenager in the lab ratted on her? Or had a surveillance drone been following her all long. Friske might have had her bugged and could have watched her

every move. Perhaps he tracked the use of the coin. The origami drone felt cold against the skin of her chest.

“How was your day, my heroine?” He asked with a contrived smile pushing the corners of his mouth upwards. He jumped to his feet as she entered the room and gave her an overly cordial hug, the coin between them like a clockwork heart.

She drew on his enthusiasm to manufacture hers.

“Excellent. I had a truly inspirational tour,” she said, aware that she had a tendency to speak too fast and say too much when she was uncomfortable.

“Very good,” he said. “We have one shift to go till Il Principe’s visit, so I want everything to work smoothly.” He returned to his desk and started swiping incoming messages. He looked very busy. His career must surely depend on making a good impression on Il Principe and his entourage. Was he going to ask her to behave around her father? She wasn’t planning to make a scene. Dirty laundry should not be washed in public.

“As you are my trusted right hand, I would like to assign you a very important job,” he said gravely as he looked her straight in the eyes.

Her throat was dry, so she coughed lightly. “Of course.”

“I would like you to escort the Brigade leader. Otto, you know him. I am going to release him among the Juveniles. As you said, it’s to show everyone that he’s just a regular guy with a big mouth.” He roared with laughter.

She cringed inwardly but tried to look honoured. “No problem. What about the others?”

“I’ll keep them on ice.” He stood up, approached her and stopped at an uncomfortable distance from her face. He seethed through his teeth: “There is no Jesus without the Apostles, as they used to say.”

There was no hiding from his searing eyes. “Yes, sir. I’m very honoured that you considered my opinion.” She looked straight ahead, imagining her stun gun on his neck exactly where his scar was. She would push it into his skin until it burned, and then she would push it some more. She handed over her wristband to him to upload the new orders.

“Go and take charge of him now,” Friske ordered. “You’ll find him in the prep room on this floor. I’ve instructed the staff to give them as much sedation as possible without rendering them incapable, so you shouldn’t have any trouble.”

She retraced her steps back to the prep room, where the four bodies still lay on their surgical beds. The nurse was standing ready to help her, clearly thinking that her earlier visit had been ordered by Friske. Otto’s face was drawn, with deep, dark circles around his eyes. The surgical cap was gone and she could see that his hair was fully blue now, setting off his milky skin and visible veins like a frame on a painting. His cheekbones and collarbone had seemed to protrude through his pale skin. She asked the nurse to wake him up and get him ready for his walk in the courtyard. “You go on,” the woman said, “I can manage this. They should be able to walk normally. You can wait outside.”

He came out slouching and shuffling his feet like an old man. How was he ever going to escape Triage? She restrained herself from giving him a hug.

“I’ve been assigned to escort you today,” she said as she walked side by side with him.

“We can talk,” he whispered. “The walls here are so thick the drones can’t transmit. Just go ahead and do your job. If Friske doesn’t suspect you already, we’re very lucky,” he said.

“Why do you think he assigned me to you?”

He shook his head and turned to catch her gaze. As he twisted his neck, he seemed to be in agony.

“Either he’s very stupid or incredibly shrewd and he’s cooking something. The point is to do what we need to do before he gets to put his plan into action,” he said, stopping to catch his breath.

Alida offered her forearm for him to hold on to. He leaned close to her.

“I’ve got the Full Foreclosure plan for you—everything you need to bring down the house,” she said, barely concealing the excitement in her voice. “You’ll never believe it - my Dad accidentally loaded the whole folder on to the vaccine token he gave me. I’ve got all the evidence we could wish for.”

He kept silent as they were passing other patients and other guards on the way to the courtyard. They slowed down their walk even more, almost coming to a standstill.

“They’re planning some high-stakes demonstrative operations tomorrow for the Grand Vizier and his puppet master.”

He reacted without cracking a smile, although she found the titles he had just invented for Il Principe and her father quite funny. “Clarissa and Proctor are going to get in with the party as coroners. It seems there’s some requirement for every body to be accounted for so they’ve drafted in extra people,” he continued. “You are to meet them at the morgue and pass on the files,” he said, squeezing her forearm. “Understood?”

She nodded.

They were close to the courtyard now. She felt the urge to offload all her feelings, but she only managed a few rambling words, “I’ve seen things yesterday—ugly, horrible things beyond my wildest imagination: mother, Marco, Miranda. Now I understand...”

“We’ll get away,” he replied. “During Il Principe’s visit, we’re planning to stir up a riot as cover and then Clarissa and Proctor will get us all out,” he said feebly.

Tears came to her eyes. Where did he get all this energy? He looked like a dead man walking, and yet he still made plans. He was unwavering in his pursuit of the cause.

The courtyard of the fortress resembled a giant chessboard. Those pieces in white uniforms were the Fed guards. The Juveniles were now in black. It was more difficult to see blood on black clothes, she thought as she entered the crowd, Otto walking one step ahead of her. She had her stun gun out, loosely kept at her waist, her finger resting on the trigger.

For the benefit of the official visit, all the newly foreclosed Juveniles were to be occupied in harmless and appropriate pastimes. At one end of the courtyard, Juveniles were playing interactive games against a computer. Occasionally, there was someone kicking and screaming at the machine. The house never loses. Surely, they must know this.

At another end of the courtyard, team games were organised. People were throwing balls, kicking and swatting them over nets. Everything you could do with a ball without having anything in your hand that could be used as a weapon.

In the furthest corner, the creative area had been set up. A huge mural was appearing on the courtyard walls. Poets were laboriously writing lines on the ground with spray paint, while others declaimed from a dais with a sound-sensitive light show playing around them. Her wristband instructed her to head for this area and she made a show of prodding Otto with her stun gun. He greeted the artists: a skinhead graffiti designer, a Blue Hair with paintbrushes behind both his ears and a girl with black lipstick and shaved eyebrows who was scratching the wall with her long nails. "Allow normal interaction," her wristband instructed so Alida stood at a distance, observing the crowd, never letting Otto out of her sight. The artists sat around him in a circle.

The sounds of the crowd merged into a steady buzz ringing in her ears, drumming up into a steady crescendo. The monochrome pattern of the assembly was tiring on the eyes.

As he stepped onto the dais with noticeable effort, Otto's face lit up. He watched the crowd, his eyes lingering on the Juveniles' faces, silently calling them towards him. His gaze had an electrifying effect and from all over the yard people began to converge on the artists' corner like rip currents under the surface on an apparently calm sea.

Their eyes met. "Do your job, Alida. Whatever your orders are." What was he doing? She wished he had told her. Or maybe he had already told her everything she needed to know. No instructions from her wristband. OK to let him do this.

"My fellow Juveniles," he began. "As you know, you're here because the Foreclosure programme has changed. Full Foreclosure. Do you know what that means?"

There was an awed silence.

"We're finished," called a voice in the crowd. "We're not going home after this." There was murmuring as people shifted, turned around, looking for the speaker.

"No indeed. We're not going home. We're not going anywhere except the operating theatres, and one day we'll go in for the last time. Whatever they've told you, it's a lie. We are going to our deaths as surely as the Jewish people who got off the trains at the concentration camps."

Agitation, shouts of anger, but like good Juveniles they were slow to think for themselves. The idea that New Italy might not be an earthly paradise was hard to take in.

Shouts of "No!" and "Never!" They were waking up but the voices were oddly doubtful. "Are we going to lie down and let them kill us? We have to act, and act now. We are our own worst enemy when we selfishly want to survive individually." He paused. "We will only thrive if we pull together as one."

The courtyard was as big as a football field, but she could hear a pin drop. More Juveniles walked slowly towards Otto. She had to shove her way to the front of the crowd. She stood steps away from Otto, her eyes on her wristband her hand on her gun.

“Our forefathers fought for our freedom. In mud-filled, frozen trenches, in burning deserts and icy mountains, they fought for our freedom and for a better future for us, the next generation. We are here now because of their courage. Now, the enemy is among us...is one of us. That generation took their freedom and used it to betray their children. You look around you, you look within you and there you may find the enemy.”

A bolt of lightning fractured the sky. She looked up. The Security Sky never created storms but there it was, great black thunderclouds massing above them.

He had always been an orator, she remembered from high-school. But now the issues were bigger than marking schedules and the opening hours of the student union bar. On the rhetorical crusades of his youth, his style had been soothing and enticing, but now he was now powerfully assertive. It was difficult to believe that his weak, tortured body, squeezed dry of energy and strength, could produce that deep-chested, mesmerising voice.

But just like in his youth, he could still spin words into a story.

“What I want to tell you today is that to this day, the most patriotic thing you can do is to risk your life for your country.” He stressed the “risk your life” bit.

Where was he going with this? She looked around at the Juveniles’ faces. They looked calm. Their reactions seemed robotic, almost apathetic. They seemed to be drawn by Otto’s speech, but she didn’t see any sign that his words resonated with them either positively or negatively. They seemed to be there because they were programmed to come listen to speeches. A few Juveniles had pushed themselves in front of her. She tried to spot other guards in the crowd, rising on the tip of her toes. She noticed Friske watching from his office window.

By now, all the Juveniles in the courtyard had come to the artists’ corner. She could feel the pressure of their bodies behind her. All had earpieces. Some already had visible grafts and scars.

“But this is not a country for young people. It’s not our country, is it? New Italy exists for the Gerontocrats. We are not the New Italy. Your enemy today is the Gerontocrat. The Gerontocrats are cannibalising us. They are consuming our future.” He shouted, one hand raised to the sky, his fist pounding the air.

There was something wrong with the Juveniles in attendance. They were doped up, judging by their shiny, empty gazes. They were not going to react to his speech. The riot plan was not going to work, unless she got Clarissa to help de-chem the crowd. Friske had made sure there wasn’t going to be any trouble. Bastard. And now he was watching her every move. She needed to stop Otto now.

“They locked us up in this trap,” continued Otto, his anger measured. “For our own good, they said. The Killing Fields are keeping others out but are also keeping us in. We wither and die because of our own ideas,” he thundered to the apathetic crowd.

She had heard enough. She shoved her way through the crowd, placing her hands in front of her like a boxer, and pushed forward. She got to the dais and said, “That’s enough!”

She was standing right in front of him, but he was looking above her head and far into the crowd. “Do your job,” he had said.

With a precise movement, she tasered him. He fell to the ground instantly. The graffitied skinhead seated next to Otto punched her in the face, and she lost her foothold. Taken by surprise, she touched her face; her palms felt sticky, covered in fresh blood. The guy had resumed his seat, scribbling away. She realised he hadn’t hit her to defend Otto, but most probably it was an automatic muscle reaction. He must have thought she was going for him. A group of guards moved in, pulled her to one side and started kicking Otto. His weak body curled up, still shaking from the electroshock. They stopped when he started spitting blood.

Lying against the graffiti wall, she looked around, trying to spot emotion of any sort on the Juveniles' faces. There was a mild commotion on the margins, but in general, their faces were expressionless. They turned around and went back to what they were doing before as if nothing had happened.

Were the others in the Fortress already? Clarissa and Proctor, could she find them? She had off-system numbers for them and she sent Clarissa a message. "Action aborted, suspect chemical control deployed." Friske's office window was empty, he was no longer there. She ordered the guards to take Otto to detention, and then she walked back to the infirmary, a hand cupped under her nose, fresh blood dripping artistic shapes on her sparkling white uniform.

The nurse from the prep room came running along the corridor and asked permission to examine her injury. Apparently, her nose wasn't broken, but it hurt as if it was. Guards, respectful and full of care, took her away to a room in the infirmary quarter and she asked for a dose of painkillers. It was going to get worse before it got better, the nurse had said. Friske appeared.

"Excellent work," he said. "We can go ahead with the execution tomorrow. Clear evidence of treasonable activity. You've done well today. I was impressed."

The effort of keeping an expression of dutiful gratification on her face made her feel sick. Her wristband was set to vibrate and she felt a message come in. Was that Clarissa? She dared not look in case Friske was curious. "Thank you, Commander. But your strategy was all I needed. I'm sorry, I'm feeling really tired. The painkillers are kicking in." She couldn't recognise her own voice. Assertive. Self-assured. After all, she was given a job to do, and she had done it. She even used her gun. It felt surreal. Against Otto. He must have known she was going to. He probably wanted her to reinforce her cover in Friske's eyes.

“I’m sure you are. Take some time out, get better. I need you. The visit is in a couple of hours. Get some rest.” He left the room, the air still heavy with his presence. He was cooking up something, Otto had said. But what?

She pulled up Clarissa’s message. “Understood,” in response to her warning about the chemed-up Juveniles. There were hypnotic sequences in the earpieces, or sedatives in the nutrition capsules—one of the two. The earpiece was more likely, because nutrition programmes varied. Even she was feeling oddly like a robot, depending on her wristband for every thought and action. She had two hours to come up with an antidote. Then there was a longer reply related to the earpiece extractor, that Alida had requested from the Black Market: “No can do. You’ll have to DIY. Scalpel it, pierce your eardrum. It’ll recover and the other ear’s still OK. Good luck.”

If Clarissa said there was no other way, it was probably true. She tried to visualise the moment the scalpel would get through the eardrum. What would the pain feel like? Maybe like having a live nerve in her tooth killed without aesthetic. Like an incredibly sharp knife—the sashimi kind—had sliced her brain into fine julienne strips. The nerves in her whole body twitched when she thought of it. Maybe that too had been programmed in, subliminal messages while she slept.

Yet there was no other way. Her earpiece was controlling her brain, the Gerontocrats’ commands seeping through. There was no turning back after tomorrow. She was going to go to the other side...join the Brigadiers in earnest. She resented the control. No more. There was a scalpel right there on the tray, the perfect size.

The nurse came back to finish the job of cleaning her up, bringing a blanket and a pillow so she could rest on one of the more comfortable beds. While she wasn’t looking, Alida took the scalpel and held it in her closed palm until it became the same temperature as her body, and then it turned clammy. Somehow, she imagined that if it didn’t feel like metal, it wasn’t going to hurt.

She lay awake looking at the ceiling, the scalpel lying on the pillow next to her earpieced ear. Thinking of what she had to do made her tremble. But with her bleeding face as cover, there would never be a better time. She tried to say goodbye to hearing in both ears. The silence felt round, fully loaded. What would the world sound like afterwards?

With an hour to spare, Juveniles started trickling into the infirmary. They were complaining of hangover symptoms: heavy headaches, vomiting, hot flushes and blurry vision. But what Alida noticed was their range of emotions. They were angry, in pain, annoyed, demanding, stressed and obnoxious. She smiled. Clarissa was a genius. She had managed to neutralise the Juvenile's programming and run some kind of emotional storm instead. From what she was seeing the limbic systems were in overdrive. Before long, the infirmary area had become very crowded—and noisy. But the nurse saw her watching the new arrivals, and bustled over to pull a screen around her.

The scalpel felt like a sword in her hand. She fixed the tips of her fingers two centimetres away from the end of the blade. She then held her breath and pushed in and out with a precise movement. It wasn't a sashimi knife that she felt slicing through her brain. It was a harakiri sword . . . a piercing so powerful that she thought her heart had stopped. She then fell on one side, blood oozing from her ear, hyperventilating, scrabbling in the blood for the implant. Yes, there it was. She'd done it. She was free.

Chapter 16

No one could say, not even his enemies, that he had things easy. Antonio took pride that he had had to fight hard for every achievement in his life. Labour Day 59 promised to be one to remember. Delivering his Full Foreclosure speech in front of Il Principe at the exemplary Triage Camp of Vinadio was a landmark in his career.

Of course, there were a few nuisances. Camilla. The fact that his cheating wife had persuaded that nosy uncle of hers, Franco, to book her into the spa for a heart valve upgrade without his knowledge, was an obvious attempt to embarrass him. The fact that his idle daughter was operating undercover for the enemy was all Arturo's doing. Friske was just the butler. None of this was going to make him lose his legendary elegance and poise. He could promise them that.

As a matter of fact, he was determined to show them all otherwise. He was certain he could be Supreme Leader one day. As he looked across that stage in the inner courtyard of the Triage Complex, he gained even more assurance. Il Principe had just come out of his latest retina transplant and was wearing dark glasses. He was obstinate about pressing the doctors to try out any new technique, and he was paying quite a high price for it. But all that meant was that he needed a clear-headed visionary on side, someone like Antonio. Arturo, to his right, kept starting conversations with him, but Il Principe seemed rightfully reserved. Franco, to his left, seemed morose. It was probably his hunting day, and he missed his buddies living it up in Val Casotto. Or maybe he was downcast because Camilla was going to pester him with more demands now that he was there and courtesy required him to pay her a visit. He would be annoyed, too.

Friske was getting ready to introduce him. He was making last-minute checks around the courtyard. The guards, all in white, lined up the walls. The Juveniles in attendance, all dressed in black, were filling the courtyard to the edges. From the stage,

the setting looked like a blood sausage with a generous layer of fat around it. The Juveniles had stern, unkind faces. Friske had assured him they were all under control. So no cause for anxiety there. He rubbed his hands.

But the view that made his day was the sight of the Brigade leaders strung up in the middle of the courtyard. He arrived earlier at Triage on purpose just to interrogate Otto, but he was unresponsive. His life seemed to be hanging on by a thread. Perfect timing, it would be, if the leader of the Bloody Brigades actually expired during his address. How symbolic. Such a good omen for a glorious future and such a warning for his enemies, all wrapped into one.

He had asked for an oversized projection of the Good Wall behind him, while he was speaking. That was his visual cue, reinforcing the message to the Juveniles that Full Foreclosure was some kind of major employment project and that they would all get a fair opportunity. No one among the Elders was as good as he was at selling empty dreams. What were they going to do without him? Of course they needed him to be their Leader. And he was going to show them just how much, right there and then.

Friske nodded in his direction, a sign that he was ready to do his introduction and then invite Antonio up to the lectern.

“Citizens,” he began, “it is my utmost pleasure to welcome you to the launch of our Vinadio Triage Complex for Full Foreclosure.” He paused to allow for the customary cheering. “We are honoured to have with us today Il Principe, Elder Arturo and Elder Franco and to listen to the author of the programme himself, the distinguished Antonio Cuneese,” he said as he opened his arms. He invited him forward and then shook Antonio’s hand as per protocol.

There was something uneasy about the set of Friske’s face. Antonio looked around the courtyard to spot any signs of distress, but he couldn’t see anything. Nevertheless,

his senses were on alert. He cleared his throat and clasped his hands before opening them up towards the crowd.

He was in character, the master salesman about to work his magic.

“Juveniles! I’m here to tell you that we’ve listened to you. You’ve told us how hard it is to serve New Italy the way you want to do, how you’ve struggled with our employment system. We have heard you and we have taken action. How many of you here have dreamed of a job?” He opened his chest and put on a smile.

A cheer exploded from the crowd. Whistling, applause. They had been programmed well.

“Here’s the answer to your dreams.” He motioned towards the screen behind him. “The Full Foreclosure programme will establish the Employment Taskforce to restore the Good Wall. I have a special feeling about that Wall. You may not know this, but I did my PhD in Engineering of the Good Wall. And I was awarded the President’s prize for it, the outstanding graduate of my year. Forgive me if I sound proud of myself. I was young like you, and I had dreams,” he put his right hand on his heart.

More whistling followed, a little bit more aggressive this time.

“Foreclosure means death,” someone shouted.

“You’re lying. It’s all a trick,” another voice was raised above the crowd.

A slight commotion among the sea of black figures.

“Yes, I was young and I didn’t know what to believe. But I learned to put my trust in hard information. To get the facts and act on them.” Antonio continued, unfazed. He swiped his device to change the screen. Numbers. Graphs. Graphics. The stats scrolled like spiders, crawling up and down the screen, weaving cobwebs of lies. It was always good to show people numbers. No one could follow them, but they always seemed legit.

“All of you will be at work tomorrow in the Employment Taskforce. You have served your country well, and the country is going to pay you back. Here, in Triage, you

will receive the utmost care you need to get ready for your new roles.” He projected his vision with total confidence.

There was booing coming from corners of the crowd.

“My brother was foreclosed. Where is he?” Someone at the back yelled and a fist raised in the air.

He could see white bleeding into black—guards entering the hard core of the crowd of Juveniles. More commotion followed. Antonio was knitting his brow. What was going on?

He looked to his right, at Friske. The man’s posture looked uneasy. He was grinding his teeth. Il Principe seemed confused and turned to Arturo. Probably looking for reassurance. Arturo placed his hand on Il Principe’s forearm and whispered something into his ear.

The Juveniles were supposed to be under control. What was going on? They were programmed to react by cheering, enthusiastically applauding and proclaiming him as the saviour.

He could see Friske tapping anxiously at his handheld screen. Then, as if in a dream state, he saw his daughter walk up the stage. Her face was half-covered with a white bandage, so he hardly recognised her, but there was something about the rebellious bounce in her steps that was familiar and when he looked more closely, it was indeed Alida. She was moving decisively across the stage to Il Principe and, shoving the stun gun into his wrinkled throat, pulling his frail form towards centre stage. The old man was speechless, unable to move. Friske pulled out his weapon and, as if mirroring the movement, all the white-clad guards from the corners of the courtyard did the same.

“This isn’t the programme, is it, Commander Friske?” she asked as she pushed Il Principe in front of her, using him as a human shield. The girl must be on something. Those nirvana buttons the kids always fell for. Maybe a bootleg batch. Or some

anaesthetic they'd given her. She was raving. Still, he'd put clear blue water between them, made it clear he had disowned her. She should have been zoned out like the rest of them, all the same. Only four Brigade members in custody - of course there were more. The control programme had been hacked. Still, no need to panic.

“The programme you planned was to have all my generation go like lambs to the slaughter, wasn't it? All that bullshit about the Employment Taskforce - you actually thought we were going to buy it, didn't you?”

The crowd was heaving with anger. More fists pounded the air.

“Well, Dad, is it uncomfortable to have a *live* audience?”

“Don't be stupid, Alida. Whatever you think's happening, you can't win this. You never could get your emotions under control. Calm down now.” But she glared at him over Il Principe's fleshless shoulder. He was glad she wasn't pointing the gun at him. Anyway, she would be dead before she managed to hurt him in any serious way, so all he had to do was keep an eye on her movements. If she took out Il Principe - well, that would save the bother of an election. Keep talking. That's how one learned to be good at anything—by watching and anticipating one's opponent's moves. Life was a game of chess, and he was the master.

Suddenly, Friske reacted, trying to calm the masses, making appeasing signs with both his hands, his gun somewhere out of sight. “Juveniles! Don't listen to her! She's a spy. A hacker. She's tried to steal government property. A traitor to New Italy. A Gerontocrat princess who hasn't got the brains to play Tetris let alone read codes right.” After saying this, he projected images of Alida faffing around in a computer room, getting help from some gangling kid to turn the screen on. There was some scattered laughter in the crowd. Antonio tried to catch Friske's eye to threaten him silently, but he was watching Alida.

Antonio's anger was boiling over. He stepped forward, pointing a finger at her. "You betrayed me! You're betraying your country. You're an industrial spy. Guards - arrest her!" He almost thanked Friske for the opportunity to discredit his embarrassment of a so-called daughter in front of the Elders as well as the Juveniles. Franco was staring into the distance as if he didn't want to be there.

And then something unthinkable happened. Alida dragged Il Principe all the way to the lectern, pushing the gun into his neck to the point of making him choke, and turned to the crowd.

"Yes, that's my father trying to get me arrested. Yes, I have betrayed him. And I would do it again. Because my father has betrayed us all. So have all our parents. Think about it, my fellow Juveniles. Our entire generation has been betrayed by our parents. That's really what Full Foreclosure means." They were listening, damn them. She was using the phoney down-with-the-kids style of an old time performance poet and they were lapping it up.

"You know those interview questions?" A roar of recognition. "When they give you some cliché moral dilemma that's supposed to give them an inside view of your soul? When they asked me during my 251st interview who I would rescue from a fire, my father or my fiancé, I said I would call the Fire Federali because they knew better. Well, today I've seen my former Designated Love Partner bleeding to death on the Hero Wall of Fame, and my father is here on this stage, and he is the one who put him there. My father's a killer. You've read about the war crimes people committed before the Change, in the bad old days? You thought that sort of thing didn't happen anymore - that's what we learn in school, isn't it? Well I'm here to tell you that what's coming down today in New Italy is a new kind of war crime only the enemies are fathers and sons, mothers and daughters, different generations."

The girl was out of her mind. With any luck she'd start gibbering in a minute and they'd all realise it was just a psychosis talking. "You're not well," he shouted. "You don't know what you're saying!" But his words were drowned by the crowd's responses.

"You know what I choose to do when shit gets real? When it's not a stupid make-believe scenario they invent to make you fail interviews?" She held the crowd in the palm of her hand. They were roaring with excitement at her questions.

"I choose to fight. Yes, I'm a traitor. I'm fighting the Federali. I'm fighting against Forclosures. I'm fighting the Gerontocrats who're planning to kill us all. That's the great state secret I've stolen - the real truth about Full Foreclosure. I've seen it, I've read the files. The truth about how they are going to kill us. There's no such thing as the Employment Taskforce. There are just a whole lot of operating theatres over there where they're going to cut up bodies and drain away our blood. Haven't you ever wondered why they're always going on about health and hygiene? So that we'll be in the best of medical condition when they harvest our organs. And then - you know, they can't even get the recycling bit right. Whatever's left of us is just going to be minced up and flushed into the river."

He couldn't just stand there and let her talk like that. He approached her slowly, but she tasered Il Principe, who staggered and twitched as the electric charge shorted on his artificial joints. Friske was trying to get closer from the other side. The crowd was screaming for blood now - Elder blood. Maybe if they could coordinate their moves better, one of them would succeed. He tried to catch his gaze, but he was elusive.

"And that's not all." She managed to be heard over the yelling and the crowd subsided to let her continue. "We're not the only ones who're going to die. Foreigners, immigrants, your Russian trainer and my Cuban nanny and the Swedish bar tender who makes those great cocktails - they're being sold next door. Sold at auction. You know,

like they sold slaves back in the days when we thought the earth was flat. You're told that's not your problem. You're told you'll benefit from their plight. You're told YOU are safe." She paused for breath. Damn, she'd learned too well from him. The damn girl was a real rabble-rouser.

There was a massive roar this time. The crowd was on fire. Someone needed to stop her. Antonio finally caught Friske's eyes just before he raised his weapon and aimed for the side of her body that was bandaged. Perhaps her sight was restricted. Smart guy Friske. He motioned towards his gun. On his three.

"You think you are alive, but in reality, you are already dead. So, are you really going into Foreclosure like sheep in an abattoir? Or are you going to save your own lives? Your enemies are here, now, in front of you. What have you got to lose?" Those were her last words before Friske fired his weapon and she fell to the ground, convulsing violently for a good few minutes.

Antonio ran forward to catch Il Principe in his arms. "You are fine, Your Excellency. You are safe," he told him, holding his frail frame.

"Antonio, get that girl under control." For such an ancient being, he recovered quickly. "Get her into the first intake and bring me her liver on a silver platter when she's dead." He said the words as calmly as if he was asking for a cup of coffee, then settled the knot of his tie and, with a great show of dignity, resumed his place on the stage.

Antonio felt himself flush with shame. He motioned to Friske that he had a point to make before Alida was taken away. The crowd was snarling, surging angrily forward. They didn't want to make the situation worse.

"Ladies and gentlemen, please can I have your attention?" He used his most commanding tone. "My daughter is not well. She has had emotional problems for some time. What you have witnessed is an unfortunate situation where private matters are

being aired publicly. I am indeed her father, in name at least, and as a senior Elder in Cuneo she has enjoyed the privileges of my name. She has qualifications, no skills. I mean, if you want to call an arts degree a skill, be my guest,” he paused, expecting them to chuckle, but there was nothing. Heavy silence.

“Her time for Foreclosure has come. Can New Italy afford to support an elite class of social parasites? Of course not. You all know that the price of our independence as a nation and the purity of our genetic heritage is austerity. We cannot afford to waste our resources. This young woman has discovered that her directionless life will finally be put to good use, as she is a perfect match for a heart valve transplant for her beloved mother, who has been seriously ill and waiting patiently for a donor,” he said. He swiped his device, intending to project above the crowd a hologram ceiling showing the organ match algorithm.

He was anxious. His hand shook. His finger slipped on the screen. The Juveniles tilted their heads, their jaws dropping open. The algorithm projected names of donors in one column and names of receivers in another. Thousands of names scrolling upwards. Sometimes, a pair lit up and was filed away. Names scrolled by faster and faster, until they became dots of code like ant tracks running up and down the giant screen. The whole algorithm was enough to make you dizzy. A fearful silence descended on the crowd.

He had them in his pocket again.

He called Friske and asked to be evacuated together with Alida to the Cardiac Suite and to have Camilla meet them there. Then, he ordered that the Brigade leaders should be taken care of as soon as possible, “to give this mob *panem et circenses*⁸” and then to disperse everyone.

“Keep them in detention for a while and we’ll run a high intensity sedation programme to get them back under control.” He felt better. He had a grip now. New

⁸ Panem et circensem (Latin) = Bread and Circus

Italy needed a leader like him who could turn a desperate situation around, who never lost his presence of mind.

The Cardiac Suite was teeming with personnel. He barked orders. Initiate a terminal procedure after the transplant, harvest all possible bio-resources and dispose of the residue. Do not harvest brain tissue in this case; patient suffering a psychotic episode, possibly drug-related. Otherwise, as a healthy thirty-three-year-old, she represented a significant profit to the Foreclosure programme, and one of the first individuals to benefit from this new opportunity to serve New Italy.

The body of his so-called daughter lay unconscious on a gurney. The chief surgeon, a seventy-year-old with a neatly trimmed beard, nodded his agreement before leaving for the scrub room. His team of nurses and younger doctors followed. A woman, with “Coroner” written in large letters on the back of her uniform, was busying herself stripping the body and putting the patient’s belongings in a basket labelled “flammable items.” The anaesthetist was reviewing the medical records on his device. Presently, Camilla was brought in and the gurneys were lined up side by side. The coroner moved to her bed and collected her belongings, too.

Antonio approached the beds, which were set two metres apart. As yet, his wife and so-called daughter couldn’t see each other. Alida was coming round now. There was a slight smell of scorching from the taser. Camilla was inert. Maybe they’d already given her the pre-med. He realised it was the last time they would be together as a family. Ironic, of course, but somehow appropriate. Sentimental ties were always the enemy of good citizenship.

“Whatever you thought you were doing up there, it’s all over now. You’ve left me no choice, Alida. Of all people, you’re the last one I could trust now. To think I gave you a home all these years. Now it’s your turn to make some sacrifices for the greater good.”

She turned her head away. An involuntary movement, probably.

The personnel around them had started to put together the containers in which the harvested organs would be placed. He could smell money. His story was going to have a happy ending. And he'd never be embarrassed by this stupid girl again.

Her wristband pinged. He lurched across her body and pulled her wrist to him. Who knew what the Brigades were sending her? Were they desperate? Planning to rescue their leaders? Or some kind of coup? He held up her device for a retinal scan. All Elders had universal access to the system files.

"Principe dead. Riot achieved. Confirm location urgent." The sender's name was IronFist. His heart sank. It wasn't true. But if it was - he needed to be the new Leader. Assume leadership - the constitution allowed it, in a national emergency. And if Il Principe was dead, this was indeed a national emergency.

The medical team were curious, looking at him. "I need a moment here, if you don't mind." The picture of a grieving *pater familias*. But all over the room people were checking wristbands suddenly. Bad news travelled fast. The young coroner was listening to some kind of vintage box. She was sitting on a bed, swinging her feet. What the fuck had the world come to? People looking for explanations in the past. Trust the future, why don't you now? If he wasn't going to make so much money off young people, he would have given up on them a long time ago.

His own wristband started buzzing. Incoming update. From outside the room he could hear the commotion from the courtyard. He had better leave. That moron Friske had lost control of the courtyard, clearly.

When he got to the door, he stopped. Something was nagging him. The coroner. She looked young enough to be foreclosed, surely. It wasn't a job for a Juvenile.

"What's your name?" he set her eyes on her.

"I'm Clarissa," she said with a smile.

“How long have you been a coroner, Clarissa?” He brought his face really close to hers to notice any twitch. His question caught her by surprise.

“When you prepared the body, you searched the clothing. What were you looking for?”

She looked up, watching him from under her thick brows, unexpectedly smiling. No sign of the respect that he was accustomed to receiving from Juveniles. She lifted her fist, turned it around facing upwards and then slowly opened her fingers. In her palm lay a token, the coin-shaped nanodisc he had given his so-called daughter at their last interview. Before he could react, the young woman’s arm flipped up towards her mouth and she swallowed the device.

He threw himself at her, hands around her neck, but it was too late. She was surprisingly strong.

“What did you do that for? You’ll make yourself ill.”

“Smile, Dr Cuneese. Be happy. Don’t you know that the revolution has started? I can give you your token in due course, naturally. Did you realise you saved your Master Plan on to that little thing? And now it’s uploading to the cloud right now. Ionised water. Just enough current to do it. She was grinning like a monkey. “Pretty noisy crowd this morning, wasn’t it? You were expecting your Juveniles to be nice and docile.”

How did she know? Had the Coroners’ office been infiltrated? He’d have to shut them down. Not a problem. The National Registry could take over the documentation.

“Don’t you want to know how we did it? Well, yes you’re right, I suppose. There is only one process that could possibly have blocked your programming. Of course we’ve hacked the communication grid. I’ve designed a limbic jammer. Works on ultra-high frequency, locks on the neurotransmitters, sends everyone over the edge. Aren’t you impressed?”

The rest of the medical team were gathering around them now. No guards, he realised. And he had no weapon, although there were plenty of instruments in the room. But she was only one small woman. He could order a citizen's arrest. No time to waste now. He had to get back to the Elders and get the situation under control.

His wristband buzzed and flashed. An official newsflash. "Reports are coming in of the death of our national Leader, known as Il Principe, during a riot at the Fortress of Vinadio where a rally of Juveniles is taking place." Pictures streaming rapidly, hundreds of Juveniles, some with weapons, running along the spa level. No guards in sight. Hell was breaking loose. He needed to get control.

A gentle tone announcing that an upload had been completed and the woman stood up with a look of triumph. "That's it, Doctor. Your Master Plan is safe in cyberspace and I'm going to beam it down to the Global Conflict Crime Agency right now."

"Well, good luck," he answered her swiftly. "New Italy is safe from those sanctimonious hypocrites. They can issue all the orders they like, nobody can get through the Good Wall. Our country is ours, and ours alone." As he spoke he called up the media strategy that he'd drafted just the day before and hit the button to action it. Within seconds the news feed on his wristband updated and he saw his name. "Our new Leader, I have assumed control, and I declare the martial law is in force. Arrest this woman, restrain her. Now! Anyone here who does not obey my orders immediately will be tried and executed as a traitor. Now stop wasting my time and get out of my way."

They seemed momentarily uncertain and he strode to the door. In the corridor a group of three white-clad guards was running towards him and he ordered them to halt and act as his escort.

"I am Antonio Cuneese, the new national Leader. I have declared a state of martial law in Cuneo. Give me a situation report," he ordered.

“Juveniles are not obeying commands and we’ve several men down.” The most composed of them seemed breathless with fear. “It’s a riot, Sir. We’ve called in the army for backup and are trying to find a place of safety for the Elders.”

“Good work. Give me your name, I won’t forget this.” He had his official newsfeed open now and keyed in an update.

In the courtyard, he saw a pile of bodies on the dais and a pool of blood widening before his eyes.

Chapter 17

There must be a word for the feeling one gets before death. Lying on the op bed, straps cutting into her skin, Alida's mind wandered, while waiting for something to happen. If there was such a word, Alida didn't know it. She just felt it. It was something the goose bumps on her skin knew, the tip of her tongue against her unbrushed teeth could foretell, the tingling across her scalp, descending on her back, towards her tail bone seemed to announce. The numbness and prickling in her feet and hands, preceding the blackout.

She chose to keep her eyes closed, not to see death when it came. The anaesthetist was going to slide a needle into her arm, fill her veins with propofenol XS or something else to put her under and she would lose consciousness before the surgeon cut her open and scooped out her heart. She didn't want the last image she saw on earth to be that of an anonymous face. Clarissa's eyes, that's what she wanted to remember. The sign that she was not going to die for nothing. Brave. Pure. Undeterred.

Noise was permeating the silence of the room, from the outside. Explosive sounds. Raucous vibrations.

She felt impossibly small, like a disoriented little girl.

Expert fingers tapped her skin, looking for the vein. The needle. Slowly, her senses started to become dull. The pungent smell of blood faded. The clinical atmosphere seemed to be thinning. She could smell something else, something more familiar, like sun-dried sweat and rope-cut skin. A man's smell.

"Get her back," a vaguely familiar voice ordered. Then, she felt her body handled by careful, but confident hands. "Get in the nasogastric tube in and the IV, now." She recognised Geeta's voice. She struggled to open her eyes. Under her heavy lids, she saw, Otto's face. No wonder she knew that smell.

“You’re alive,” she exhaled, relieved. “Thank God, thank God. What’s happened? Why...?” Her brain felt overloaded, the question would not form. After a feeble attempt to push herself up to sit, her body resigned itself to being horizontal. Encouragingly, she started to feel slightly better. Above her face, Geeta and Frieda were working with drips and monitors. “Just a quick lavage and you should be OK. Just relax a few more minutes.”

From the corner of her eye she saw the surgical team standing at the edge of the room, then filing out through the door. Her mother was still unconscious on a gurney, and a porter pushed it after them, into another room. She watched them pushing out the medical personnel and Camilla’s bed into another room and cordoning off her part of the lab.

Slowly her mind cleared. The light seemed brighter. She felt exhausted, but ideas were crystallising, information linking up. Otto’s bulk cast a shadow over her face.

“You look pretty good, considering,” she told him.

“For a half-executed criminal, yeah, I suppose. They’ve pumped me up with steroids,” he said. “Instant muscle power and it kills the pain. Seems like we’ve got to take a full pharmacy with us.” He pointed to a backpack that was lying near his feet. “How much longer?” he asked Geeta.

“Three minutes,” she said, looking at her wristband, at the monitors. “She’s pretty resilient.”

Otto started to unfasten the surgical straps, his fine motor skills as bad as those of an arthritis-ridden old man.

“What happened?” she asked, feeling stronger by the second. “How long was I out? I heard il Principe was killed? Or was I hallucinating or something.” She realised

it was historic moment but equally dangerous. Her father, more power-hungry than ever, was sure to make his move.

“No, that happened. We took him out.” He was holding her hand, absent-mindedly. His eyes roamed the room. She wasn’t quite sure whether tiredness had overcome him and he had to rest or whether it was his way of telling her he had cared. Then he recounted what happened, looking her in the eyes, as though he were telling her a bedtime story.

“They were getting ready to execute us all. The highlight of the launch of Full Foreclosure, that was what Friske wanted. Il Principe ordered the scaffold to be brought up towards the stage. He said he said he wanted to look into my eyes when I died. Trying to make the most intimidating spectacle, some kind of finale for the Brigades in front of the Juveniles. Show them who’s in charge. Make an example.” He shrugged his shoulders.

“Thirty seconds,” Geeta’s urgent voice was somewhere behind her head.

“These guys were already on the scene. Soso was in Friske’s office on the first floor with a laser-focus rifle. The plan was to leave it to the last second. So I was led out first. The crowd were absolutely silent. It was so strange. The guards put the rope around my neck, pulled the lever and then Soso fired. He got the rope, I hardly felt it. I fell, of course. There must have been a second shot that got Il Principe but I never heard it. I fell forward, on top of him. I heard something crack and there I was, lying on the old bag of bones.”

“She’s done. We can go now.” Geeta’s voice again.

Otto helped Alida down from her bed. She slipped into the fresh black uniform the girls had brought for her. The soft fabric felt like a dream, no seams, no uncomfortable bits. She nodded in his direction, asking him to finish the story.

But Otto gulped. He tried, but the words would not come out.

“The crowd went crazy. They were all armed, all the Elders. But they froze. Terrified. Arturo could have taken a shot at me. He didn’t. Friske was ready to fire, but Arturo stopped him. Franco might as well not have been there,” he added. “Then they stormed the stage. The riot started, the guards were just overwhelmed. There were so many Juveniles everywhere, Soso couldn’t get a clean shot. Friske managed to get a few of them together to get the Elders away. Geeta came to get me, we knew where you were...that’s all.”

“OK, time to go. Where to, Captain?” This was to Geeta.

Geeta pulled up her geo-tagged plan and projected it from her wristband as a hologram.

“We’ll leave the Fortress via the morgue route, as planned. The objective is to leave New Italy by the only safe route, the pass at Monte Cervino. About 500 kilometres north. Break into two groups, to give us the best chance of success. We’ll go on ahead because you’ll be slower. RV on the far side. Soso and Proctor will stay behind to lead the Juvenile resistance. And then the mass event.”

“What does that mean, mass event?” Alida asked.

“One of your father’s encrypted files contained the answer to disabling the Killing Fields. We had suspected it, based on our calculations, but now we are sure.”

“What do you mean?” I thought they could only be switched off from Central Control.”

“The technology isn’t as strong as the government claims. If enough biological matter enters the force field, it will fail. So if we can get a large number of people to step into the Killing Fields together, simultaneously, from both sides, the system will close down.”

“That’s the theory?”

“Nobody’s tested it, you’re right. There was an incident five years ago, when a group of African migrants tried to cross the field at the same time as a group of cattle stampeded on our side. The field went down then. Only for a few minutes, then they fixed it pretty quick. Nobody knew outside the emergency services. But it’s our only hope. If we can’t open the border, nobody can save us. Let’s get going.”

Geeta and Frieda led the way back into the corridor and out in the courtyard. There was debris everywhere. The stench of tear gas, blood smeared on the ground, bodies lying where they had fallen. People were running in all directions. Here and there, packs of Juveniles were still engaged in body-to-body fights with Guards. The mayhem seemed to be escalating. The movements were distracting, confusing.

Geeta raised her hand. “Guys, there is a shortcut, through the stage. It’s exposed, but it shaves about five minutes—five minutes we lost chit-chatting,” she said sternly and made a step towards the stage.

“They steal our future; we steal their present.” A group of Juveniles nearby started to chant as they kicked two Guards lying on the ground. Alida looked away.

Otto and Geeta led the way, climbing the flight of stairs leading up to the stage.

The screen behind the stage projected images from the hundreds of drone cameras around the camp. At that moment, a camera zoomed in on a Juvenile woman who kept saying, “You’re not gonna get us. Stay hungry, stay hungry!”

“What is she going on about?” she turned towards Frieda.

Il Principe’s body still lay on the stage. His oxygen tank lay to one side, his white silk robes now red with blood, his body so small and fleshless it seemed like a pile of sticks.

“They’ve figured out the Government has been controlling them through the nutrition capsules, so nobody’s eating. They’re boycotting food until they can find a natural supply.” Frieda explained hastily.

“The capsules and the propaganda?” Involuntarily, she reached up to touch her torn ear, feeling the oozing wound she’d given herself.

Frieda nodded. After a pause, she asked “How is your ear?”

“Oh you know, I miss the syrupy voice,” Alida shrugged her shoulders.

“When I took mine out, it didn’t heal up for weeks.”

Suddenly, they came to a halt, almost bumping into Otto and Geeta. Friske was blocking their way, with a Guard’s fire gun in his hand.

“Well, if it’s not the Failure Brigades,” he sneered, his gun held with casual proficiency and ready to fire. Four of them, one of him. The weapon was automatic. He could kill them all in thirty seconds. “I’m taking you all down. “You’re first, Jesus,” he fired in Otto’s direction. Both he and Geeta fell backwards.

Alida threw herself to the ground, and there was il Principe’s oxygen tank, lying in a smear of blood. She kicked it with all the might of her legs in Friske’s direction and it swung heavily to reach Friske’s feet, knocking him to the ground. He dropped his gun. Alida crawled as fast as she could towards Friske, seized the weapon and stood over him, getting ready to fire.

“Alida, I’m OK.” She heard Otto’s feeble voice, “Geeta...”

She turned her head. Greta’s body must have shielded Otto. Her forehead seemed to have an Indian bindi between her eyebrows, only that it was a bullet hole, seeping with blood. Friske was struggling, crunching forward and gripping her leg. She kicked him hard in the ribs. She pulled back her boot and struck again with all her might. He doubled over, moaning loudly.

“Everybody down.” She turned to one side, held out her gun towards Friske, who was doubled over the oxygen tank. This had to be done. She had never killed anyone. She rescued drowning wasps from jam pots, saved butterflies from cobwebs. But it was either the Gerontocrats or everyone. She took aim and fired.

The oxygen tank exploded, ripping through Friske's body. The blast swept over them, a brief tongue of fire reached them then subsided. A portion of Friske - head? chest? - landed next to her. Neck. His scar, the only reminder of who he had been.

She started breathing heavily. Death. This was real. It wasn't make-believe. There was no turning back. She had just killed a man. Her hands had frozen, clasping the weapon. Otto came and picked her up gently. He held her body close to his chest for a while.

Jesus would be nothing without his apostles, she thought.

Geeta's body was still warm. Strange, though, how it was already an empty house, a shell, something the spirit had deserted.

It suddenly dawned on her. That's what New Italy's mantra meant — the interest of many prevails over the interest of one. Clarissa, Geeta - they had died so the Juveniles would live. She had always just repeated the phrase for interviews and such. But she had never actually seen it acted out. This is what it looked like. The serene and peaceful husk in which a friend had died a violent death.

They reached the elevators located in the north-west corner of the courtyard. Geeta's wristband was now offline. Her death had switched it off. Alida pulled up her staff itinerary on her own wristband and located the morgue, at the end of the corridor. They took a horizontal conveyor belt, to make carrying the corpses easier. They crouched, side by side, Alida, Otto and Frieda, silent. When they got to the door of the morgue, Alida swiped them in.

It was a large room, as big as a warehouse floor, and cold. Chilled cabinets hummed along the walls. A large plastic crate, half full with discarded organs, was the only item outside the cabinets except for the dissection tables.

The lights above were tile-sized and inundated the room with radiance, making it feel less grim. On the right-hand side, glass cases, ranged neatly, in rows upon rows. Hearts, eyes, lungs and kidneys were all on display.

She strode towards the end of the room, as Frieda and Otto starting unpacking some of the kit. At the opposite end of the room, different parts of the body were exposed: muscles, ligaments, fat, deep tissue. Smaller cabinets for stem cell cultures, bone matrix, embryonic tissue. The contents of every cabinet was listed on the screen by the hinges. One cabinet contained nothing but an eye, of unnaturally large proportions, propped open with the use of a speculum. Under it, a dedication: “To Alex, with love.” The note looked ancient, yellowed, written by hand on a special type of paper. She could appreciate the quality, possibly mid-twentieth century. How strange to find such an exhibit in a morgue.

She was brought to her senses by Frieda, who was busy taking the organs out of the window display and showing them in what seemed to be a lightweight instantly-inflated canoe.

“What happens now?” She asked Otto, but he did not seem to hear her. “Are you OK?”

“I’m fine.” He exhaled, leaned forward as if he felt faint, palms on his knees. “Don’t worry. We have to get away. Help Frieda, we need to leave.”

“We’re going to take the organ waste canoes,” Frieda said, kicking the one she was loading with cold plastic vacuum packs. “They’re what’s been used to send the organ waste down the river to a nutrition capsule plant where the Stura river meets the Tanaro.

Alida’s stomach churned. So that had been in her daily diet all along. State-controlled forced cannibalism, another dark secret of New Italy’s success.

“We’re taking two canoes. I’m going first and then you and Otto will follow,” she said, her hands busy shovelling in more organs. She stopped to estimate how much she had loaded in each canoe.

“What are we taking the organs for?” she asked, touching the slimy, yet unscented objects. They felt cold, and slippery, like marble in her hands.

“To throw of the security scanners. With this frozen material beside us, we’ll be invisible to the thermal imaging the Feds will use to find us,” she said.

Frieda seemed so sure of the procedure. But surely they would freeze themselves on the icy river, covered with frozen meat.

She turned to Otto, in time to see him with a syringe.

“We’re all going to get into body bags. They are lined with aluminium foil, which is the first line of defence against thermal imaging. They’ll hunt us with drones, so we need to be extra careful,” she said and pulled out the body bags from a store cupboard by the door. She pushed one towards Alida, for her to look at. It smelled of fish. Or that’s what it seemed like. A light mist of nitrogen vapour was rising from the loaded craft.

“Keep the bag unzipped a little way so you can breathe. We need to be extra careful. Guards. Drones. Before the riot, they called in the army. You never know who’s watching,” she unzipped the bag slightly to show Alida how to make room for breathing.

“What you’ll experience will be something like hibernation. Your physical processes will slow temporarily. We’ll cover the bags with the organs, which are held in cryostasis. The liquid nitrogen will reduce our body heat. Also, since we’re using canoes, we won’t be insulated from the water. The temperature of both Stura and Tanaro is around 5 degrees above zero. When we get to the Po, it’ll go up to seven,” she

explained. “It’s going to be cold,” she said, pulling out garments from the backpack, emptying it. “Put on these thermals. We’re almost ready.”

When they were done getting kitted, Frieda asked Alida to give her the origami drone.

She opened it, downloaded the itinerary from her wrist band and gave it back to Alida.

“I’ve just put all the information that you need on it, especially for the ascent and descent of Mount Cervino. You’ll need to set it on speaker and have it lead the way at very close range. You are both dehydrated, exhausted and injured. You cannot afford to follow your instinct. This is science: trust it and you will be safe.”

Frieda pulled up the same geo map that Geeta had shown them in the op room.

Alida felt seething anger towards those who had taken her friends’ lives away. Her father. Friske. She had finished Friske. She was going after Antonio. Disabling the Killing Fields was the first step. The Global Conflict Crime Council could take care of him after that.

The hologram showed them the whole of northern Italy. Frieda zoomed in on Cuneo, pointing out the route they were to take, down river, across the central plain and then up into the Alps where the jagged peak of Monte Cervino soared upwards.

“From here, it’s about 500 kilometres to the border.” She traced the river network north from Vinado. “The river will carry us downstream in the canoes and we will not use the motors, so we’ll be even less visible to the scanners. We’ll get to Cuneo, and continue on to reach the Tanaro. Then, you follow the flow until you get to the Po’.”

“Right,” Alida said, checking her wristband had all the information logged in.

“When do we meet again?” asked Otto, poring over the map.

“We won’t,” she said drily. “I will travel much faster now I’m alone.” She highlighted the wider ribbon of the Po’, swirling eastwards from Torino to Piacenza. “Now, here you have to pay attention. When you get to the Po’, the flow is very fast. It will carry you on towards Venice. You need to activate the engine of the canoe at that point, and make sure you are fit to do that. Fight to stay conscious. When we’re further away from Cuneo we can hope they won’t be searching for us and you can ditch the organ cover. Fire up the engine and push upstream, up this tributary here, towards the Cervino mountain river, to the north.

Alida checked Otto’s face. He looked drawn out, tired, and had large, dark circles underneath his eyes. She needed his support through this river cruise, then mountain ascent and descent. She couldn’t do this alone.

“We have a target of six hours for this. Let’s do this!” Frieda offered an open hand to the group. Alida put her hand on top, and Otto put both his on top. “Let’s do this,” they shouted and for the first time in a while, smiled.

There was a belt to take the canoes down to the lowest level of the Fortress, where they could be launched from a quay built under the massive stone walls. There were no guards, and no Juveniles, just the echoing walls and lapping water. They zipped up, strapped themselves inside the canoes, pushed off and felt the current pick up the craft and carry them away.

Then, before long, they were moving on the smooth channel of the river, faster and faster. For centuries the wide, deep waters had been used to transport goods and people, and every hazard had long ago been removed so the river flowed as evenly as a canal. The temperature was so low, Alida had trouble breathing. She tried to feel Otto’s body heat through the body bags, but it was impossible. The mist of nitrogen, without scent but bitterly chilling, was blown across her breathing space by the motion.

For a moment, shifting under the chilled blocks of human tissue, she wondered about the people, young people, who had died to stock the mortuary with organs. She must have known some of them. Cuneo was a small town, after all. To her shame, she could hardly remember those older kids from school who had faded out of the community. She had hardly noticed. Foreclosure had been something that happened to other people.

Shaking off the macabre train of thought, she tried to imagine the voyage that she could not see. She pictured them floating through Cuneo, past the Civico Quarter, the Inner Ring, under the *Ponte dei Suicidi*. She could feel the presence of the Great Gerontocrats Palace, like a dark shadow over the water. She turned her head to one side, with her good ear up, and tuned in the noises of the city. The Juveniles Quarter was resounding with explosions. Screams. Shooting. Resistance. It was the first time she missed her earpiece. She would have tuned in now to the Government Channel and found out one version of what was happening.

Lying in the cold body bag with a small strip of sky visible through the zip, she could see nothing to tell her where they were. At some point she thought she felt a faint smell of paper pulp. Then of cocoa. She stayed quiet, for as long as she could hear the sounds of the city. When they faded, and all she could hear was the ripple of water against the fragile hull of the canoe, she couldn't resist any more so she asked Otto whether he was OK. Alone under the stars, just the two of them in a boat. If they weren't in body bags, hiding from Federali drones, this could be rather pleasant. "Yeah, but I want to sleep," he said. She tried not to imagine the worst. So easy to slip out of consciousness on this long dark journey. His voice was faint. After a while, she decided to take a chance, unzipped her bag and reached over toward him. He was breathing normally, a little bit of colour coming back to his cheeks. She left the bag unzipped to let oxygen in. The wind caressed his face. She tucked a strand of blue hair out of sight.

The river was wider and stronger now. They must have reached the Tanaro now, which was bigger than Stura. Solar farms on the banks, as far as the eyes could see. The unearthly light of the Security Sky's twilight sequence shone down. If she was on the streets of Cuneo now, she would be fined for breaking the curfew. She was thankful for freedom. Even the pain in her ear was worth it. A small price to pay for freedom.

Ahead she could see the banks widening and a large patch of water opening up, approaching. They were soon going to flow into the Po'. The current was already faster. She took out the origami drone and checked its signal. About half an hour to go before they had to start firing up the engine. Mount Cervino was waiting.

Chapter 18

The air carried new scents, the watery, muddy river smell, and the metallic tang of blood and flesh. Some of the small organ bags were thawing, judging by the squishy sound she heard when either her or Otto moved. The sky above them was clear of drones. With her good ear, she listened intently, yet heard nothing but the river noises.

“Otto, can you hear me? I think it’s time to start the engine,”

“OK, I’m here.” His voice was still weak. “Something smells bad.”

“Great standard of personal hygiene, huh? Top marks from the Hygiene Imperative panel.” She nudged him gently with her elbow and he laughed. It felt good to laugh, even for a little bit, after the pain and horror they had been through.

“We can get rid of this stuff,” she said, sitting up and beginning to drop the wet organ bags over the side of the canoe. Stuff. The word sounded so terrible in her mouth. These were real people. Juveniles who disappeared, swallowed by the Foreclosure system. She tried to be respectful as she picked up the remains and consigned them to the river.

When they were done, they took a brief moment to breathe in the clear breeze, but had to fall into the bottom of the craft immediately as a fleet of search drones flew over them. The river carried down all kinds of debris. From above, their canoe was probably indistinguishable from a tree trunk that had fallen into the water in one of the forests upstream. They had passed a few of those already, they were a regular sight. When the drone formation disappeared from sight and hearing, Alida raised her head cautiously. Scanning the horizon, she could see them flying towards Mount Cervino.

She felt a knot in her stomach. The difficult part of the journey was about to begin. Behind them was nothing, now, except death.

Otto started the engine and she engaged the steering gear. The canoe picked up speed and she swung it out towards the northern bank, watching for the next tributary. The damp air blew through her hair. Otto's curls fluttered against his pale face. She opened her mouth to take in all the oxygen and closed her eyes to feel the last of the sunrays on her face and eyelids. Soon they would be standing in real sunlight, not the artificial radiance of the Security Sky.

The channel opened up and she steered the canoe into it, the gutsy little engine butting the craft upstream through the choppy water. The little tributary was swollen with spring meltwater. Before long, they got to the end of their journey. The village of Cervinia at the foot of the mountain, a huddle of empty resort hotels and traditional wooden chalets clustered around the spotlit, white-walled church. Night was falling, the street lights twinkled, the wind was sharp and intensifying. She looked up at the Security Sky, filling with thousands of clouds pregnant with rain. Were the Feds manufacturing bad weather over the Cervino because they'd guessed their plan to escape over the mountain? The Sky was programmed to follow the seasonal weather patterns from before the Change. It was good for mental health. So maybe this wasn't enemy action.

Alida took out the origami drone and checked their itinerary. They spent a few minutes under the deck of a beautiful Gerontocrat's summer house that was all lit up for a party, listening to the music, chinks of glasses and roars of laughter echoing from the valley sides. Did they know that Vinadio had been taken over by Juveniles, that there were riots on the streets in Cuneo? Had they been given orders to keep up the appearances of a good time?

Either way, she was thankful for the distraction.

"We've got to bivvy up the mountain, above the surveillance drone level," she said, as she tucked the device in her hidden side pocket.

“OK. I’ve got a terrain reader. How far up do you think we can trek up during the night?” She opened her backpack and gave him a strength bar to eat, without saying a word. Terrain readers were a wonderful thing, but night climbs were no easier with them. The mountain was nothing but a mass of darkness now. She checked the time and saw the date had changed.

“Hey, guess what? Today’s my actual birthday. We can celebrate when we get to the top.” Where they would be safe. Actually safe, for the first time ever. Beyond the reach of New Italy, the Feds, her father. A sense of immense urgency came over her; adrenaline shooting through her body.

“Let’s sort out what gear we can take with us. Need to be light and fast,” she said, her hands busy unpacking the kit Frieda had given them. Bivvy bags. Forget the insulating pad. Or maybe take one. She hesitated, then left it aside as a maybe. Sleeping bags. Ice axes, crampons. Forget the helmets. This was a live or die game. No maybes. Belays. Cams. Headlamps, yes. She put hers on over a warm wool beanie. Warm socks and gloves and windproof jackets. Sixty metres of twin ropes. A Swiss knife she tucked away in her front pocket, easy to reach with her right hand. No place for harness. Basically, no place for extra safety. Rations and water. She hesitated whether to take the goggles. There would be snow and ice on the top, but they wouldn’t spend long enough there to get snow blind. Judging by the incoming storm, they would be so lucky to have too much sun. So she ditched them. Packed up both backpacks, fast and expertly, as only a climber knows how.

“You have grown up so much,” Otto seemed content to watch her make the decisions. They had started climbing together, but he had often treated her like some annoying child who needed to be watched the whole time.

Looking around, she made sure no one was paying attention to their black clad silhouettes in the night darkness. With the head torches off, they started marching

briskly up the path towards Cervino. Otto, she saw, was making a conscious effort to move strongly, masking his sense of weakness. As soon as they were past the Gerontocrats' mansion, she turned right, into the pine tree grove behind it and started the first leg of their trek up the mountain, using old trails that avoided lights and people.

After a brisk ascent on their hands and knees, the path led them to the site chosen for them to stop, the base of a corniced wall, which offered them protection from the wind and drizzling rain. She took out the bivouac sacks and set them up on the foot-wide ledge. There was room only for them to sleep head to head.

"Your five-star accommodation is ready," she bowed to him, mock-ceremoniously. He took his headlamp off without a word, rubbed his face with the back of his hands and slipped into the sleeping bag, gasping as his tortured joints flexed when he knelt. For a long while she watched him, seeing his muscles twitch in his sleep. Did he have the strength left for what lay ahead? Cervino defeated young climbers at peak fitness. She didn't close an eye for the next couple of hours, watching over him. Trusting the rain to diffuse the light from her screen, she checked their route, trying to memorise it. Trying to figure out alternative ascents if anything went wrong. The snow never melted up there. The southern rock faces would be sheets of ice. She hadn't done much ice-climbing.

The electric pink of the alpine dawn softened the peak when she woke Otto up. The rain had stopped and a small patch of the palest aquamarine in the sky let a few lumens through. It was cold. A crisp wind scoured their cheeks. She watched as he chewed slowly his strength bar then took small sips of water.

"I've been thinking about the mass event. Got an idea how to get everyone to sync up their step in the Killing Fields," she said, putting as much enthusiasm in her voice as she could.

His eyes seemed to light up.

“I’m going to programme the Good Wall with a message. I’ve always wanted to do it. That was all I really liked about the job I got. But I used to think about clever designs and forgotten painters. But it would be easy to programme a countdown, like a rocket launch or the clock striking midnight on New Year’s Eve.” He was looking at her like an uncle again, damn it.

“Your father must have been gutted that you took an Arts degree. He must have been furious.” He sounded cheerful, as if the thought of Antonio enraged made him feel stronger.

She recalled her father’s preaching about Science education. How only losers chose the Arts.

“He called me choosy,” she smiled bitterly. “You know, spoilt because of my upbringing and unwilling to put in the hard graft that Science implies. As if studying Arts is easy.” She was happy to see his eyes alight, but was also conscious of time. She sneaked a look at her wristband and decided they could stay for a few minutes. Clouds were massing at the far side of the valley, threatening to overwhelm the sun and bring more rain. The light was already treacherous and uncertain. If a flock of drones flew over, it would be hard to see them. At that time, though, drones were deployed over the main transportation routes. She had never seen a pack of black drones like the ones on the river yesterday. They looked like oversized crows looking for dead meat.

“You, choosy? Nah,” Otto mocked her. He leaned against the rock face, reached out and plucked a White Lady, an Edelweiss.

“Look at this,” he held it out in front of his eyes, in wonder. “If nature wanted to give us only Science, it would give us brown boxes growing out of the earth. Same shape, same colour. Science can only tell me what this is. Art can tell me it’s beautiful.” And he handed the flower to her. “The flower of Achilles, used to heal the wounds of his fellow warriors in the Trojan War,” he added.

She looked at his delicate fingers, ungloved. His pensive forehead. Then, she looked away.

“I wouldn’t change a thing. Maybe one thing — I would go back in time and stop feeling so bad about being choosy. Come on, time to go.” Then, she gently pushed him, leaning her shoulder into his, to signal the need to move.

Up the path, loose rocks, slippery from the rain were dangerous. The landscape was barren around them. Lunar. Soon, the drizzle turned into light snow. The temperature was falling fast. She put on a second pair of gloves, fleece inside the insulated layer, and her fingers were thankful.

Soon there was ice underfoot. They moved up slowly, zig-zagging towards the ridge and away from it, like in a dance, until they reached the Awakening Ropes, a cable fixed over an iron ladder to help climbers over a vertical cliff. The wind was picking up and in the distance she could see the ominous white wall of a snow storm approaching. She shouted towards Otto, but she realised she needed to wait for him so he could hear her.

“This route is too exposed. Why don’t we try another one?” she said, as she checked out her wristband. A possible route was given to the left, that led them just below the Carrel Hut. Other climbers might be there, which was why they were supposed to avoid it, but it looked as if they could move across the glacier under the hut and on towards the summit.

They needed to use the ropes, the climb was going to be difficult. She watched Otto as he opened his back pack to kit up. His fingers were slow to move. Her calves were burning from the first stretch of climbing. Neither of them needed a big challenge so early in the day.

“We’re going to have to simul-climb this stretch, to move faster. Whoever goes first fixes the safety line,” she said, motioning her head toward the steep rock on her

left. He nodded. "I'll take some weight from your backpack so you get to be more nimble and it'll be easier to control the rope." His lips were turning blue. It was too cold, they didn't have enough protection. Simul-climbing meant finding a rhythm, finding your partner's pace too, moving rapidly over the mountain. It was so long since she'd done this, she hardly remembered. Figure Eight knot at the rope end. Kiwi coil to fit the rope around your body. Clove hitch to the belay hoop. She then put a grigri on the rope, to allow him to feed her as much rope as she needed, quickly.

They were on the diagonal ledge, the most vertical section of the route. Alida moved first, slowly. Her mouth was dry. She licked her lips from time to time to collect the melted snow, but she could feel her body getting more and more dehydrated. They needed to reach the glacier under the Carrel Hut to melt some water.

After fixing the first anchor, she started free climbing, Otto releasing the rope that she needed. The wind was cutting through the skin left exposed, her face, her neck, her wrists. The snow was blinding her, shooting needles of cold into her skin. After about forty metres, she stopped and anchored again, then resumed, belayed by the loop. Otto started moving as well. She knew she wasn't supposed to look down, but she had to. He was very slow. On any other day, in any other weather, she would feel relaxed. At that moment, she was extremely concerned. She returned to the anchor and waited for him to reach it.

"We're going to short-fix this, Otto. It's not working," she said. He nodded, his lips sealed dry by dehydration. Then, she started climbing again, pulling herself up to clip every subsequent bolt. She kept leading the climb although she badly felt the need for a switch. The smart thing to do would be to bivvy up again before they reached the border and left New Italian territory. Actually, the smart thing to do would be to be home with a cup of real coffee. But resting and getting hydrated was likely to be the next best choice.

She set her eyes on getting to the glacier west of the path to the hut. Otto grew weaker by the minute and in desperation she tried something she'd only heard about, short-fixing the entire forty-metre rope on every anchor in a Pakistani Death Loop and waiting each time for him to catch up until she could set off again. Every time she saw him, he seemed weaker.

They finally gained the diagonal ramp of the glacier, a narrow, triangular platform of even snow with the blue deep void of a crevasse on the far side, and hunkered down. She mined the ice with her axe, scooped some fresh snow, abundant by now, then started to pass him capfuls of thaw. They seemed to be alone on the mountain, no sign of other climbers. She checked possible routes again. He rolled away from her, increasing the length of the rope slack between them.

"You need to go on without me," he shouted, to cover the howling of the wind. She watched in dawning horror as he took off the coiled rope and backpack and crouched beside her, patting her shoulder awkwardly with his arm. "Leave me here. I'll be OK in the hut."

"I'm not going anywhere without you, even if I have to carry you," she said, stepping towards him. He raised one arm towards her, to make her stop. "You know I can't let you stop here. You have to go on, Otto. If the storm doesn't lift soon you would be cut off. I can't leave you. If it weren't for you, I wouldn't be who I am today. I can't let you die here."

"Yes you can and you must. I am dying, Alida. I'm not going to make it. You've almost carried me all morning. I'm a just burden to you." He started to cough and broke off to get his breathing under control. "Trust yourself. You can make it. I know you can. Go fire up that Good Wall. Go kill the Killing Fields. I'll be watching." And before she could, move, with such a simple, small movement, he unclipped his end of the rope, and stepped away from her, towards the crevasse.

She heard herself howl like an animal, throwing herself forward, desperately trying to hold on to him long after he was gone. She screamed his name and the syllables were smothered in the snowfall. Visibility was hardly more than a metre. All she could see was white nothing. Otto was gone.

Deep down, she knew he was right, but she couldn't get herself to accept that he had taken that decision. Maybe the pain had become too much. Maybe it was something she said. Or hadn't said. She gazed at the last spot where she had seen him until she felt the deadly hand of the cold dimming her sight and slowing her heartbeat. Scrambling back, her blood flowed again and her face was a mask of pain.

The Edelweiss was still in her pocket. She took it out, kissed it, launched it from her palm and into the abyss. A spiralling wind plucked it away and hurled it downwards.

The snow was coming in flurries now and the grey sky breaking up with lighter patches. Against the horizon she could see the peaks of mountains much lower than Cervino appearing as sharp-edged silhouettes. She looked over the territory of New Italy and felt nothing except a burning pain over her heart. But now she had to go on. For him, for all her generation, for her country even, though after so many years of lying propaganda the words revolted her.

Her eyes were sore. She was too dehydrated to cry now and any tears would have turned to ice anyway. The coiled rope wrapped tightly around her body, as if Otto were giving her a last hug. She put back her device then picked Otto's axe and clipped it next to hers on her belt.

Crampons on, ready for the steep climb over an ice wall to the west. Pulling her body weight up with the axes and her steel-clad toes possibly the most taxing effort she had ever experienced. Her muscles burned and she remembered she had forgotten to

drink water when she was giving it to Otto. Craving moisture, she placed her face on the ice and rubbed it. It felt cool for a while, then it started itching and feeling hot.

As she stood there, hanging to the ice wall, a dark dot in a sea of blinding white, she felt the hairs rise on her back. She looked to her right — there was nothing but white snow blowing in her face, and to the left — more of the same. The storm was raging behind her, over the abyss. The only way was up. With only her arms and legs to rely on.

As she grunted her way upwards, she heard something like a mosquito next to her good ear. When she looked again to the right, a military drone the size of her torso, with air-lift hooks, was hovering next to her. A camera lens bulged out of its surface and pointed right at her face, moving like a one-eyed cyclops. She screamed, but there was little use for that, she realised. The drone plucked her out from the ice with its lifting claws, locked her in, then airlifted her a few hundred metres to the Cerral Hut as if she was a feather.

The hut was metal-walled and the door flew open automatically. The drone pinned her to the wall of a spacious room, the hut's central reception area. The drone's metal shell latched onto the magnetic wall with a tight grip, its claws extended like spider legs, locking her legs and arms in place.

Although it had been upgraded and rebuilt with the most modern technology, the interior of the hut was still decorated in traditional Alpine style. There was a vast fireplace, and logs crackling in the grate. There was a pine table, laid up for one. Candles flickered in wall sconces. At the end of the table, a set of butcher's knives were lined up on a magnetic holder.

Soft music was playing in the background. She felt her cheeks on fire. She flexed her fingers to see whether she could still feel them. They felt raw. Her good ear picked up the tune. It was familiar. She had heard it many times before. It was Einaudi,

Le Onde. Shivers crept up her spine. Then, Le Onde softly ended, to make space for something else she had heard before. Neneh Cherry.

“Bastards,” she shouted at the empty space.

Her father appeared from the adjacent room. For an instant she thought she was hallucinating. He was dressed as if he was going to the opera in a tuxedo, and his patent shoes.

A carefully created expression of deep paternal regret, a tragic slump to his shoulders.

“I hoped, Alida, that our information was wrong. But of course we have the full transcript of your messages and even I can’t defend you any longer. New Italy has done everything possible for you, as have I. You have had the most comfortable of homes, the best and certainly the longest, possible education. Again and again you have been given the opportunity to repay your country.” She realised that this speech was not only for her benefit. Facing the place-setting on the table was a small screen on the wall, and on it was the image of the Council of Elders. She looked up and saw the camera in the ceiling.

“Even now, when the coward who led you into this conspiracy has in turn betrayed you and taken his own life, yet you persist. It isn’t a pleasant thing to order the execution of a family member, however undeserving. Nor to action a special interrogation before the final penalty is paid. But unfortunately I have more courage than your friend. Or your lover, whichever he was. So I have volunteered to serve my country by undertaking these duties myself. It will be my first action as Supreme Leader and nothing will give me deeper joy than to demonstrate my absolute loyalty to the state in this way.” He then slowly moved towards the set of knives and started sharpening them on a thin blade.

Alida looked around the room. It was terribly bare. There was nothing under or around the table; the pine-panelled walls were deprived of decorations. She looked at

the metal shell that was locking her into place, felt the magnetic wall with the palms of her hands. Her wristband, with its metallic content, was flat on the wall, the force so strong that she could not move that arm. The other hand had a wider range of motion. She started to move it, intending to reach the axe picks at her waist but could not reach.

“You can’t do anything,” he said, testing the tip of the blade with his thumb. “I wouldn’t expect you to understand why the north pole magnet of your wall ‘tray’ doesn’t get attracted to my north pole instrument tray. Basic science. If you hadn’t studied Arts you might have worked it out...”

Her right hand was sore. The effort of moving it across the magnetic field was making veins stand out. She felt her temples explode. What was he going to do? He was not that crazy.

“Are you going to kill me?” she asked, making the sign of the cross with the tip of her tongue, inside her mouth. She thought of Miranda, who would have said a prayer for her now.

“No,” he said, approaching her with the thinnest knife in his set. “Not yet. We need to be sure we know what your plans were. Everything. And those of all your associates. Of course we have the data on your other friends’ devices. Surprising that one so clever should be so infantile in her security systems. But we need to be sure we have everything. Zeus did not kill Prometheus when he stole fire from heaven. Zeus sent his eagle to pick at his liver. Every single day of Prometheus’ immortal life,” he said. “That’s the idea we’ve been working on for this interrogation procedure. I thought the classical allusion would appeal to you.”

On the screen, the Elders seemed amused. He paused, playing to the gallery, giving her a few more seconds. Think, think. The answer was in the room. Two magnetic fields, north pole to north pole rejecting each other. Right. Like poles

repel...Basic science. The answer must be something simple. She looked at the line-up of knives on the magnetic strip. Antonio caught her gaze.

“I will be using all of them tonight. Nothing but the best for my daughter.” He raised his glass of red wine in her direction. On the screen, the Elders chuckled. They’ve hated us all along, she realised. That’s what New Italy is running on. Hatred. The old hate the young. Makes it easier to kill us.

She needed something to fool the magnets into attracting each other. Iron. The simplest way was to change the polarity on one magnet, but she couldn’t physically do it from where she was pinned.

Or... attract the magnet strip with the knives to her. The answer came clear. She dragged her hand to her pocket, felt the origami envelope with the coin in it between her finger tips. Unwrapped it with tiny motions like a nervous tremor. She kept her hand cupped for a split second, felt the heavy disc of metal squirm like a living thing in her palm, then released it towards the knife stand, on a boomerang trajectory.

The iron drone stuck to the knife stand. Then, acting as a shield between the two magnets, it started moving backwards, towards her. At first, it was slow. She caught Antonio’s eyes. He was still focused on the Elders on the screen. Then, it took it a second for the disc to attach to the magnetic wall, the way she had been. But it was near enough, and the steel blades repelled the force, just as she had hoped. Her limbs were suddenly free and she fell to her feet, landing as gently as she could.

The nearest knife was strong enough to pierce the armour of the military drone. A twist of the long blade and the control console hung loose, disconnected. What did she remember from that course on the history of the Mafia? For a fatal stabbing the ideal blade length was 18cm. The next blade was just the right size. She seized it and advanced towards Antonio.

He was so intoxicated with his own triumph he did not hear her. Bizarrely, the Elders on the screen could see her approaching while he was oblivious, posturing in front of them. She saw Franco's mouth trying to frame a warning. Do it now. Don't think. Don't give him time to play on your sympathy. That's not your father. That's the dictator planning the mass extinction of his country's young.

He registered their alarm, began to turn. Adrenaline was pumping in her bloodstream, making her feel she had the strength of ten. No more Princess, no more comfortable bamboccioni life. She had work to do. Carotid artery, twist and rip. She had to jump to get the height for the strike. The blade sheathed itself in her father's wrinkled neck.

The shock on his face. The wide dark eyes rolling. He stood for a few seconds, then fell on one knee, one hand desperately fumbling at the wound. He tried to call for the guards but his throat was already full of blood.

"I suppose I should be grateful you gave me your love of the mountains. You know where there's no cheating? In climbing. If you cheat, you die. Cervino is your greatest achievement, you've always said that. Quite poetic that you're going to die here. Oh, sorry, Dad. Poetry's just a self-indulgent waste of time, isn't it?"

He fell sideways and blood began to pool on the floor. On the screen, she saw the room empty, only old Arturo sitting, dazed, while out of camera range the remaining Elders were calling for help. Who knew what would be hunting her on the mountain now? No time to waste. She picked up her stuff, fixed her crampons and left.

Outside the hut the storm was subsiding. Whirling spirals of tiny flakes, a gusting wind, uncertain light. She put on her head lamp, checked her gloves and ice picks in each hand. Rolled up her balaclava.

She was going to get to the other side. Dead or alive.

The climb from the hut began first along a ledge, then the slope became steeper and steeper. Before the Change, mountaineers had fixed steel chains over the most difficult overhang and she seized the cold links gratefully. The wind was crisp and sharp, cutting her cheeks mercilessly.

She got to the point where she needed to build bombers for every pitch. She clove-hitched herself to one bolt, left two metres of rope slack and clipped herself to the other. It was slow going. Gusts of wind beat at her body. The rocks were icy under her hands. The adrenalin rush was wearing off; fatigue was seeping into her muscles. She needed to be extra careful. Imperfection means death. She hadn't forgotten.

Suddenly, she got to an ice waterfall. She reached out to feel how solid it was. Her instinct said no, it was safer to retrace her steps and go back to the last anchor and find another way. But it could only be a few minutes before a new flight of drones scoured the mountain. No time. She was going to free climb it, with her crampons and ice picks. The only way. She swallowed hard. She prayed the ice would hold.

The ascent. It felt like swimming upwards, against the current of the waterfall. As difficult and as uplifting. As if watching herself from above, she saw that she had left a smear of blood on the ice, felt that her clothes were stiff with the frozen liquid. For a second, revulsion overcame her. Then she climbed on with new strength. The fall held and she reached the top of it.

The crest path led her to Tyndall peak. Howling winds were sweeping across the peak, making every step a huge endeavour. No wonder New Italy had not bothered to put its borders here. Nature was the biggest deterrent to anyone wanting in or out. She took out her drone to check for directions. She needed to proceed horizontally north east for two hundred metres, then get to the most dangerous part of the mountain, the so-called Enjambee, a cleft between peak Tyndall and Cervino with vast abysses on either side. The summit was within a stone's throw.

Her father's voice came to her. Other children remembered nursery rhymes, but her childhood memories were of her father boasting. His great climb of Cervino was his favourite. "I realised my greatest enemy was not the mountain. It was fear. So I emptied my mind of the knowledge of danger and climbed on. The climb itself is not so difficult. Terror of the climb was the real challenge."

"I have no fear," she said to herself, trying to make it a mantra as her arms and legs moved her forward. "I have no fear. The climb is not so difficult."

The rocks tilted, flattened under her body, reared up suddenly and seemed to tower over her. It felt like a welcome. Again, the old-time climbers had left their mark, a fixed steel rope leading upwards over the precipitous shoulder of the mountain. She realised she had reached the Jordan stairs, the last challenge of the ascent. Beyond lay the Italian summit, the border. In happier times climbers took photographs here, but today low cloud insulated her. Only a metal ridge on the rock to mark the end of her country. She looked back over New Italy, a misty blank, a few shreds of the valley visible, and gave a last salute. Here and only here you could just walk out of this nightmare. No Killing Fields here. She stifled the superstitious voice that whispered, "Are you sure? It can't be that easy." She stepped forward.

Another step. A narrow, snow covered ridge. Another step, and another. She was free. Ahead was the Swiss summit, another metal line on the rock. She passed it, expecting her heart to leap but feeling only its steady pulse, throbbing in her ears from the effort.

A few more steps and the descent began, as hazardous as the climb up in its own way. The plan was to stop at a small plateau and rest before completing the journey. She pitched her bivy, rolled into her bag and waited, eyes wide open, for sleep. She stared at the zip of her bivouac, while trying to breathe. Her eyes wouldn't close, her

mind would not shut down, for fear that she would stop breathing, that, even now, a flock of drones would scream out of the sky and seize her.

It was the morning of her thirty-third birthday. It was the first time she had been out of New Italy. The air was crisp. The sky was pure blue. She woke up in the free world.

She looked down the Matterhorn, the Swiss side of the Cervino, from her bivouac. The Swiss valleys were opening up at the foot of her mountain, peacefully. There were over three kilometres of descent, almost half of it vertical.

She didn't linger long on the events of the night before. She had a difficult descent in front of her, abseiling her way down the mountain, following the Hörnligrat. She felt like a teenager, her whole life ahead of her. She heard something new, something cheerful, happy even. A sound she only recognised from old documentary films about farming before the Change. The rounded, tinkling notes of cow bells, floating up from the green valley below. Milk, not nutrition capsules.

On the horizontal ledges, she stopped to recover her strength. Her faithful drone, stripped of its origami shell and its aluminium padding shone in the sun. It sat on her arm like a falcon. The pre-loaded itinerary signalled Frieda's location. Cervino marked the place where Italy, France and Switzerland shared borders. She had taken a different route and was in France on the Colle della Maddalena. They were to meet there, as soon as possible. She looked forward to meeting the other Juveniles in exile, Foreclosure Deserters. The ones, who, like Otto, had tried to escape New Italy and had made it across.

The arrow on her map was directing her to a road, and there a farmer, obviously used to disoriented climbers standing unsteadily at the roadside, gruffly stopped to ask if he could give her a lift to the village. Her arrow flashed calmly, pointing her towards Frieda's marker. On the village square, between fat, gold-coloured French houses and cafés with welcoming tables on the pavement, where pink flowers surrounded the war memorial, and there she was, her chocolate skin glowing in the morning sun, her dark curls bobbing as she ran towards her.

Relief, joy, a long hug and a good cry in strong arms. The exhaustion, anxiety, fear, had overwhelmed her at last.

"I've seen the mayor, he's cool. He's got the governor coming down, they've called Paris, the Foreign Office are on the case. It's all going right. You look terrible." And then, the words she had been dreading, "Where's Otto?"

"He didn't make it. We got to the Carrel Hut and he..." She couldn't say it, but she knew.

"He said he was holding you back, right? I expected it. He was in pretty poor shape and if anyone believed in making the right sacrifices it was Otto. But hey..." She took her face in her hands, kissed her forehead. "They want you to go to hospital."

"I can't, I have to programme the Wall, get that thing down. You don't know..."

"You're out of it, Alida. I can see it in your eyes. Exhaustion. You have to rest, you're a danger to everyone in the state you're in."

Eventually, Frieda brought her battered device to the hospital, despite the nurses' warning that Alida needed weeks to recover her strength. Yet, working on re-programming the Good Wall gave her all the strength that she needed. Her mind seemed clear as crystal. Heart pounding fast with excitement. As she entered the central system, and the passwords worked, she began to feel invincible. Her father's threats had been

empty. Whatever they had learned from Clarissa's wristband, it wasn't enough to stop her. This was going to work. They were going to overthrow the Gerontocrats and free every citizen of New Italy.

From time to time, they stopped to remember, danced to Neneh Cherry and chewed gum. They blew gum bubbles, thinking of Geeta, Otto and Clarissa. Then the French Foreign Minister came, and after him the President, and with them a team of scientists from the National Institute of Physics who ran all the data again, seemed mightily impressed and recommended that it would be safe to commit soldiers of the French army to take part in the liberation of Italy.

Finally, Alida finished the re-programming of the Wall. Frieda had sent the instructions over to Soso and Proctor on the other side. "Mass event can begin as planned. Piccolo San Bernardino, tomorrow at noon. The Wall will give the signal."

They had chosen the minor San Bernardino pass because there the border ran over a broad saddle in the foothills of the Alps, a place where two hundred people could hold hands, spread out in a long line and take the one step forward that would liberate their country. On either side of the old road stretched green alpine meadows, still in the first flush of spring, blazing with flowers, the vivid green grass surging out of turf still saturated with melt-water. Across the road stretched the hologram barrier, rippling with messages, Danger of Death, Do Not Cross. Beyond that, the outer side of the Good Wall was a grey screen and the Security Sky a huge darkness that stretched across the valley, as if it was swallowing the light.

Four military trucks drove up and parked side-by-side with precision. A hundred soldiers jumped down, their boots loud on the tarmac. Sergeants called orders; the men and women formed up in a line. Overhead, two military helicopters swooped down the valley and hovered in readiness.

Seconds away from projecting the launch message on the Good Wall. Alida's heart beat out of control. She set the timer to ten seconds and then joined Frieda, shoulder to shoulder, on their side of the border.

When the timer struck zero, the Good Wall lit up with two synched messages: one step forward: "Stay Hungry." Second step forward, "Stay Choosy." Then a countdown clock. Ten, nine, eight, seven...

On one, there was a vibration, tingling in the hands and feet, and then the microwave field fizzed out as if it never existed. The Good Wall switched off, the valley was flooded with sunlight, revealing a line of people, Juveniles in black uniforms, staring in disbelief, then hugging, crying, running forward into the arms of the soldiers who were swiftly given the order to respond at will.

New Italy opened to the rest of the world. Hundreds of Juveniles now, surging forward. People were starting to dance. A media team was filming. The French mayor was marshalling his dignitaries, getting ready to make a speech.

Frieda said, "Otto would have loved this."

"Yes, he would," she answered. But there was no time to mourn the past. To think of what could have, should have, would have been.

All they had was the present moment. It was a new start. Time to build another country. Piece by piece, one day at a time.

THE END

**The Overeducated and Underemployed in Italy
and the United Kingdom**

Critical Ethnographic Research

INTRODUCTION

In my research on overeducation and underemployment in Italy and the United Kingdom, I have used Erich Goode and Nachman Ben-Yehuda (1994)'s moral panics framework, defined as when 'a condition, episode, person or group of persons emerges to become defined as a threat to societal values and interest' (Cohen 1972, p. 9, cited in Goode & Ben Yehuda, 2009, p. 23). I have then explored how this framework explains the mono-narrative of young people's transition from the world of education to the world of employment in both countries. By focusing selectively on particular stereotypes of young people (identified in the moral panics literature as folk devils), such as angry youth in the United Kingdom (UK) and aboulic youth in Italy, I have found that there is a rhetorical circle between public discourse and creative writing, which has negatively shaped our understanding of the reality of young people's transitions to adulthood.

Moreover, the scholarly fields (such as the economics of education, social psychology, anthropology of youth, and sociology of labour, among others) concerned with the suite of topics related to the education-to-employment transition are fragmented, with economics dominating most policy discussions. Consequently, policy solutions in both Italy and the United Kingdom are based on neoclassical economic theories such as the human capital theory. To better address overeducation and underemployment, there is a need for inter-disciplinary research and comprehensive policy solutions to address this distortion.

My academic thesis is divided into five parts. First, I explore how various social theories that underpin the public discourse regarding youth overeducation and under/unemployment fail to offer solutions for the current dilemma of mass higher education and a lack of opportunities for highly educated young people. Second, I use the moral panics framework to show how the pervasive dichotomy in public discourse—'angry youth' and 'aboulic youth'—is used to stereotype the young and maintain the power dynamics between generations and socioeconomic classes. I draw on a discourse analysis of newspapers in Italy and the United Kingdom to support the point of view that the media is a key enabler in engineering this moral panic.

Third, I illustrate how speculative fiction uses what Heather Urbanski (1975, p.6) called 'the rhetorical circle' to draw upon pervasive social fears, elaborate them creatively and reflect them back to the readership by incorporating these fears into storytelling, using world-building as a scaffold. I analyse the main characters in *A*

Clockwork Orange by Anthony Burgess and *Requiem for a Prolonged Adolescence* by Marco Bosonetto, showing how these authors drew upon the folk devil stereotypes of their time (the angry young man in Burgess' case and the *bamboccione* or *puer aeternus* in Bosonetto's case) to distil the essence of the moral panics of their time.

Fourth, I have interviewed thirty Italian and British young people on different points in their journey from education to employment to illustrate through ethnographic inquiry the fragmented and nonlinear natures of their experiences. Thus, my research shows how the obsession with quantitative research and the limitations of the dominant statistical methodologies are detrimental to policy-making since they exclude the voices of the key stakeholders in this transition process.

I use a critical paradigm for my academic research based on the fundamental premise that creative writing should play a key role in exploring the gaps between social research and social activism.

Fifth, through self-reflexivity, I show my creative process and choices that have enabled me to write my novel in a way that both respects the conventions of the speculative writing genre and draws on actual research findings.

The creative writing portion of my thesis is a full-length novel, *Stay Hungry, Stay Choosy*. The premise of my novel is that by 2050, Italy is a *de jure* gerontocracy that cannibalises its young. Thus, young people in Italy are used as spare organ parts for an ageing population, if they don't obtain success in a socially acceptable way by the age of thirty-three. My protagonist, Alida, is a thirty-three-year-old young woman from a privileged background who is in a race against time to save herself and her generation. My research guided my plot and characterisation choices and offered a number of challenges along the way, posing questions about the best way to weave together academic research and creative writing. Fundamentally, the constraints of the genre—such as the protagonist's agency—drove some of the key narrative choices. For instance, *bamboccioni* are depicted as lacking motivation. However, I had to strike a balance between an authentic protagonist-*bambocciona* and the requirement for the protagonist's agency to drive the plot.

However, my interviews show that even those that self-identify with the label of *bamboccione* are able to articulate their trials and tribulations. This contradicts the public discourse about their idleness and implied lack of agency, thus enabling me to weave the threads of academic research and creative writing together in a coherent way.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research Paradigm

In my research, I have explored the answers to the following research questions:

1. Why is the Skills Gap narrative similar in the UK and Italy, despite cultural differences?
2. What are the mechanisms of power at work and how do they reproduce themselves?
3. What are young people's experiences of transition to the labour market within the dominant narrative?

To answer these questions, I have used the critical paradigm, anchored in critical theory. Emerging in the 1980s out of what Lincoln and Denzin (1994, p. 9) called 'the crisis of representation', the critical paradigm is 'a challenge and critique of the modern state' (Creswell and Miller (2000, p. 126).

My research is based on Stacy M. Carter and Miles Little's (2007) systematic model for thinking about and assessing qualitative research, which clarifies the linkages between epistemology, methodology and method within the critical paradigm.

Rooted in the critical paradigm, critical ethnography is a qualitative research methodology that, according to Anderson (1989, pp. 249–270), resulted from the merger between the 'interpretivist movements in anthropology and sociology with neo-Marxist feminist theory' and created what Clifford Geertz called 'a blurred genre' (Geertz 1980, pp. 165–179). Finally, critical ethnographies seek to examine concepts such as class and inequality and bridge the gap between theory and practice (Adler and Adler (2008, pp. 1–30).

Thus, using a critical research paradigm, in my thesis

1. I will explore the power structure via a moral panics framework
2. I will show how the power narrative is reproduced via culture artefacts, i.e media and literary analysis
3. And finally, via critical ethnography, I will investigate young people's experience and understanding of the dominant mono-narrative on The Skills Gap

The Role of the Researcher

Within this framework, the researcher is on a mission to ‘expose how political ideology is inextricably interwoven with knowledge’ (Scotland, 2012, p. 14). This is a process of deconstructing meanings whereby the researcher uncovers hidden assumptions or, ‘how narrative accounts are constructed, read and interpreted’ (Creswell and Miller, 2000, p. 126). Since, arguably, critical ethnographers believe that the informants’ perception of reality, that is, their ‘conscious models, exist to perpetuate, as much as to explain, social phenomena’ (Anderson, 1989, p. 253), it was crucial in my analysis to uncover through triangulation of information the meanings assigned by informants that may sustain powerlessness. Without direct insights from the population affected by the topic studied, it is impossible to arrive at a well-rounded view of the research topic and challenge the status quo. This is why a qualitative research design is fundamental to exploring the topic at hand. However, the key methodological challenge invoked by critics is the question of validity. I explain below how I attempted to ensure the validity of this study.

Validity

In my research, I used Schwandt’s (1997, cited in Creswell and Miller, 2000, pp. 124–125) definition of validity: ‘how accurately the account represents participants’ realities of the social phenomena and is credible to them’, applying it to inferences rather than the data themselves, as suggested.

I have also subscribed to Creswell and Miller’s two-dimensional framework for choosing validity procedures, underpinned first by assumptions based on Guba and Lincoln’s (1994, pp. 105–117) taxonomy of post-positivist, constructivist and critical paradigms and second by the following recommended lenses:

- a) Researcher’s,
- b) Participants’ and
- c) Individuals external to the research.

Research undertaken within a critical paradigm, using a researcher’s lens, uses reflexivity as validity procedure (Creswell and Miller 2000, pp. 124–130). Thus, in *Criteria for Assessing Interpretive Validity in Qualitative Research*, Altheide and Johnson (1994, p. 489) refer to the process of interaction between researcher, topic and sense making as ‘validity-as-reflexive-accounting’. This is the concept that describes

the iterative process that began with my my critical ethnographic research (academic thesis) and fed into my creative writing process and shaped the output (the novel), which then elicited new insights for the thesis. It was thus fundamental that I applied the researcher's lens, allowing me to explore in depth the topic of reflexivity. In Patton's (1980, p. 339) terminology, 'the researcher's lens' is the process whereby the researcher returns to data 'over and over again to see if the constructs, categories, explanations, and interpretations make sense'. More specifically, Anderson (1989, pp. 249–270) unpacked reflexivity into several strands:

- a. **Reflection on the relationship between theory and data:** Through qualitative data analysis (QDA), which Fernandez (2012, pp. 7–28) labelled 'the Straussian grounded theory', I have drawn out 'categories of meaning' from data and employed 'constant comparative analysis' to ground the analysis in the data.
- b. **Effects of the researcher's presence on the data collected** (Guba and Lincoln, 1994, pp. 105–117).
- c. **Self-reflection:** The reflexivity section of this thesis self-discloses the assumptions, beliefs and biases that have shaped the inquiry.
- d. **Reflection on the dialectical relationship** between structural forces and human agency: these reflexivity aspects are dealt with in the section of the analysis that challenges the mono-narrative on youth unemployment and moral panic.

In addition to reflexivity, and although not required to ensure the validity of the study under the critical paradigm, I have chosen another validity procedure: triangulation. This is the procedure that in Creswell and Miller's (2000 pp. 124–130) model falls under the post-positivist paradigm using the researcher's lens.

Creswell and Miller (2000, p. 127) point out that, through triangulation, which draws on multiple methods to cross-check the various themes identified through analysis, the researcher ends up constructing a valid narrative account, because this 'systematic process of sorting through the data ... relies on multiple forms of evidence'. Thus, my research emerged from elaborating the insights emerging from the iterative analysis of a number of methods, that I will elaborate further in this chapter.

Ontology

Within the critical paradigm of my study, I subscribed to the ontological position of historical realism that views realities as ‘socially constructed entities that are under constant internal influence’ (Scotland, 2012, p. 13) and constitute an exchange mediated by language. In Scotland’s (2012) view, language is an active tool that can be used ‘to empower or weaken’ (p. 13) and that expresses a wide range of values, such as social, political, cultural, economic, gender and ethnic, that in turn shape reality (Guba and Lincoln, 1994, p. 110).

Epistemology

As mentioned earlier, the critical paradigm is trying to spur action based on theoretical insights. Thus, critical epistemology has an emancipatory function and seeks to reveal what lies beneath the surface of knowledge, given that ‘what counts as knowledge is determined by the social and positional power of the advocates of that knowledge’ (Cohen et al., 2009, p. 27, cited in Scotland, 2012, p. 13). One of the most suitable methodologies to enable this type of enquiry is critical ethnography, which Carspecken (1996) framed within the heritage of critical theory.

The consequences of this epistemological stance for the critical ethnography research process are manifold, as Carter and Little (2007, pp. 1316–1328) highlighted: the researcher becomes ‘inextricably implicated in every step of the research process,’ participants in the study are seen as active contributors; the research uses multiple sources; and the primary and secondary data is analysed and interpreted through theories of power, oppression and liberation, since the research process represents for respondents a way to process their own struggle to break free from assigned meanings. According to Crotty (1998, p. 157), ‘critical methodology – which is the strategy on which the choice of methods is based – is directed at interrogating values and assumptions, exposing hegemony and injustice, challenging conventional social structures and engaging in social action’ with a clear aim to ‘emancipate the disempowered’.

This approach enables the participants to be made aware of their own situation and power struggles. In my experience, the researcher and the respondent are in conversation not only with each other, but also with the meanings drawn from conversations with previous respondents. Although due to time limitations it is difficult

at the inquiry stage to estimate individual change in the post-research phase, it is hoped that meanings are re-elaborated post-encounter and in hindsight.

As I will show, the idea for the thesis was drawn from insights and snippets of conversations that started years before the actual research took place. Thus, as Scotland (2012, p. 13) opined, ‘the starting point of a critical researcher is often preconceived’. I came across the misconceptions surrounding youth unemployment that ignited the research idea in conversations in many countries involving people from diverse socio-economic backgrounds. The decision to interrogate the mono-narrative emerging from these discussions was based on the assumption of power asymmetry and thus the potential of a hidden age-based class struggle. Through inquiry, I sought change at individual and social levels.

Methodology

My research has a qualitative design based on a critical paradigm, drawing on critical theory and aiming to critique the neo-liberal discourse that frames the issue of youth unemployment, overeducation and underemployment. The neo-liberal assumptions are that participants have perfect information about the market and that the market will reach an equilibrium with supply meeting demand. I thus reveal the power asymmetry in the market by using a moral panics framework, then value the multiplicity of views and emancipatory dialogue with participants, co-critiquing the mono-narrative about The Skills Gap and then when I write up the results of my critical ethnography as a ‘story’, i.e a novel drawing on the results of my academic research within the constraints of speculative fiction.

Within the qualitative research design, I have used the following research methodologies, in order to provide specific direction for inquiry in my study:

1. Firstly, I used a theoretical lens to assess power structures (moral panics framework);
2. Secondly, I used a critical discourse analysis to explore how power dynamics are at play in media and literature (mass-media texts, literary novels and interview transcripts);
3. Thirdly, I used critical ethnography to explore and deconstruct meanings and the participants’ perception of reality (critical ethnography of a cohort of British and Italian postgraduates);

Through critical discourse analysis, I studied ‘the ways power and domination [...] are expressed, enacted or constructed [...] by text and talk’ (van Dijk, 1998, p. 209), while by overlaying the critical ethnography methodology I sought to create an analytical lens for social change, drawing on Carspecken’s five stages of critical qualitative research (Hardcastle et al., 2006, p. 153).

Given that a corpus of British and Italian newspaper articles were core to my research on how moral panic is generated and fuelled by the mass media, it was important to draw on Cannon’s (2011, p. 7) insights into the relevance of critical discourse analysis. As she pointed out in her own analysis, media actively shapes opinions through reiteration of slanted public discourses that serve power holders.

Another form of social activism, in my opinion, is creative writing. The peculiar structure of the Brunel creative writing PhD, which brings together academic research and creative writing, allows the researcher to experiment with the boundaries of research methodologies and to blend them so as to strengthen, inform and co-create new boundaries and ways of meaning and representation for both creative and scientific work.

The narrative approach, which is the staple of creative writing, digs deep into social realities to untangle power relations that are fundamental to worldbuilding and into raw emotions to build conflictual situations essential for drama. A promoter of interdisciplinary dialogue, Andrew Beatty explored the limits of ethnography and urged researchers to explore the possibilities of literature to identify ‘lessons in how to capture the full significance of emotion in action’ (Beatty, 2010, pp. 430–443).

Beyond the factual information that creates the reality of the research project lies the rich emotional lives of research participants, which reveal on a deeper level how respondents feel about a situation of disempowerment or empowerment. Thus, in the context of critical ethnography, Jean L. Briggs showed that ‘the interrelations among emotions, fieldwork, and writing, showing that what we feel, how we think and write about it, and how it all happened are questions that cannot be easily separated’ (Briggs, 1970, cited in Beatty, 2010, p. 431). This manifested itself during my own creative writing, when I realised that my protagonist emerged and grew as I conducted the interviews.

Beyond the subjectivity of the researcher’s and the respondents’ emotional reactions to the research data, what Nancy Scheper-Hughes called ‘a political economy of emotions’ is directly relevant to my research (Scheper-Hughes, 2007, cited in Beatty 2010, p. 434). Scheper-Hughes was able to show how ‘specific emotions were deliberately

engaged – even mandated – in the process of national healing’ in South Africa. I have drawn on this idea to explore the dominant emotions in the media portrayal of moral panic and the stereotypical emotions expressed in the literature texts (i.e anger and aboulia) that I analyse in the framework of this research.

In my thesis, I have thus attempted to reveal how young people assign meaning to their experiences within the dominant mono-narrative; how this narrative enables power holders to maintain power structures and serves to oppress young people and how creative writing can contribute to challenging the mono-narrative and add to inter-disciplinary research on young people’s school-to-work transitions.

Methods

Stewart (1998, cited in Adler and Adler, 2008, p. 6) argued that the ‘ethnographer’s path’ was crucial to understanding why certain topics are chosen and how certain methods are selected and used. In the case of my research, I happened to be in Italy in 2008 during the mass-media frenzy over the Italian politician Padoa Schioppa’s statement regarding the *bamboccioni* (Corriere della Sera, Redazione 2007a) that erupted into public discussion. I also found myself in London during the riots of 2011 as I was completing my Masters degree. In both cases I followed the representations of these events in the local media in real time, and I was struck by similarities in the power play within the public discourse on young people, although the local contexts were wildly different. Both situations had as a common root the plight of young people who found themselves with a spectrum of undignified employment options.

Having spent most of my career engaged in social justice issues in developing countries, I started to look for evidence and hard data as I was trying to make sense of the stories. I realised that there were striking similarities between the stories of young people in Western countries and the stories I had heard in less-developed countries, including: Papua New Guinea, Burundi, Georgia and Lebanon.

As I started looking at official statistics in Italy and the United Kingdom, I found interesting gaps in the data on youth unemployment, as well as an under-researched and less profiled story about the young who are increasingly overeducated and underemployed in both countries. As much as I tried to find an account that explained fully and to my satisfaction what was going on, I couldn’t.

It is a commonly acknowledged trope that novelists should write the story that they’ve always wanted to read but cannot find on the publication market. I followed this

principle and embarked on research to unpack the inter-generational power plays in both countries. This is the main reason why I chose a critical paradigm, because it enabled me to examine power dynamics and at the same time put forward an emancipatory call-to-action for young people who, like me, were trying to make sense of the dominant discourse. It thus enabled me to do what Scotland (2012) argued that critical methods are meant to do: ‘enable realities to be critically examined from a cultural, historical and political stance’; ‘promote dialogical relations of equality between the researchers and participants’; and, finally, ‘create an agenda for change or reform, enhancing the lives of the participants’ (Scotland, 2012, p. 14); in my research, I have used fiction as a way to mediate the dialogue between research participants and society and make sense of similar events happening concomitantly in two different geographies.

Within the chosen epistemology and methodology of Carter and Little (2007), I have selected the following methods:

1. In my literature review, I have explored theories of youth unemployment, overeducation and underemployment; statistics; and extant research on moral panics with a focus on youth and unemployment as deviance;
2. Corpus building – critical discourse analysis of selected UK and Italy newspaper articles regarding youth unemployment, which also fed into the moral panics framework analysis;
3. Literary analysis. I have used critical discourse analysis of two novels, focusing on two emotions: anger and aboulia; This analysis has informed the the power analysis and showed how power reproduces itself via cultural artefacts;
4. A set of 30 cases: semi-structured interviews with UK and Italian graduates on their path of transition from education to the labour market.
5. Self-reflexivity has revealed how I have undertaken my research from my historically and culturally situated standpoint and the choices I made based on this standpoint that enabled me to write up the findings in a novel form;
6. Finally, I have written up the critical ethnography findings in novel form; I have used insights from the research and analysis into moral panics, distilled also through the process of self-reflexivity: for instance, the Civicos are set up as the quintessential moral entrepreneurs in the novel, they are the ‘right thinking’ people found in the literature.

During my fieldwork, which involved conducting semi-structured interviews in the United Kingdom and Italy (see Appendices 1 and 2), I experienced a desire to do more than write a novel, specifically to get involved as a social activist on issues regarding youth unemployment. Upon reflection, I understood that writing a novel was a way to become more socially involved.

Sampling

As advised by Small (2004, cited in Carter and Little, 2007, pp. 1316–1328) – who indicated that in qualitative research ‘neither bias nor representativeness is an appropriate standard’, and, therefore, the use of language such as ‘sampling’ is not helpful for qualitative researchers – instead of referring to my thirty interviewees as ‘a sample of n=30’, I will refer to them throughout the thesis as ‘a set of 30 cases’.

For this research, I have interviewed fifteen British graduates and fifteen Italian graduates. I started with a number of Brunel graduates whom I knew through my studies, and I initially adopted the snowballing technique, whereby respondents recommended other respondents at the end of each interview. However, being mindful of the likelihood that a ‘pure’ snowballing technique would lead to all respondents being part of a social network (Small 2004, cited in Carter and Little, 2007, pp. 1316–1328), during the selection process, I aimed to the extent possible to adopt Yin’s (2002, cited in Carter and Little, 2007, p.1318) case study logic, that is, to look for unique cases that would add different characteristics to the previous respondents, an approach similar to ‘sampling for maximum variation’.

Case study logic, in Yin’s terms, leads to sequential interviewing, a process whereby the first respondent’s answers raise new questions that become integrated into the subsequent interview guide, and so on. The objective of sequential sampling is saturation. In both the UK and Italy cases, the research reached saturation by the 10th–12th interview; however, a few additional interviews were conducted to verify this was indeed the case.

For the media analysis undertaken in the framework of this research, I sampled twenty articles from Italian and British newspapers published during the moral panic events and their aftermaths, using key categories such as ‘youth unemployment’ / ‘*disoccupazione giovanile*’, ‘London riots’ and ‘*bamboccioni*’. The selection of articles was made using Cannon’s corpus building process, which narrowed a large number of

articles forming ‘the universe of discourse’ to a ‘a small sample that represented the most specialised for the research aims’ (Bell, 1991, cited in Cannon, 2011, p. 6).

Data Collection

Mass-Media Review

The corpus for media analysis was built from an initial search of Italian and British newspapers articles. The aim was to cover at least ten articles from each country; however, this initial target was exceeded. In the case of Italy, two separate peaks in media interest were charted through newspaper articles: one in 2008 and another in 2012. Comparatively, interest in the London riots peaked in 2011 with a minor surge in 2012, when information about criminal convictions was published. Throughout the process of media analysis, it was clear that exclusively covering the period delineated as the moral panic timeframe would deprive the analysis of important insights that the media elaborated on later in the process.

All sources were accessed online and indexed at the time of access throughout the research process. The following detailed keywords were input into the search functions of the newspaper websites: ‘*bamboccioni*’, ‘*disoccupazione giovanile*⁹’, ‘angry young man’, ‘clockwork orange’, ‘unemployed’, ‘youth unemployment’, ‘overeducated’, ‘underemployed’. Following Cannon (2011, p. 8), the articles reviewed were ‘annotated in terms of discourse themes and power inequalities’.

Interviews

A semi-structured interview process was selected because its ‘flexible framework’ (Cannon 2011, p. 6) allowed the researcher to engage with the interviewees’ responses and probe for further details. I have included key quotes from my interviews (anonymised) in Appendix 2, to illustrate themes that emerged during my analysis. The protagonist, as well as other characters are composites of features that have emerged during interviews and media analysis.

I drew on Somers’s (1994, pp. 605–649) observation that ‘while conditions shared with others [...] can affect the respondent’s narrative of self, her ultimate narrative identity depends on her accumulation of experiences, which is hers alone’ and thus built on the

⁹ Youth unemployment (English translation from the Italian original)

idea that each interview was a unique case with uniquely relevant insights.

Although I initially expected to interview only graduates who fell neatly within the category of ‘overeducated’ and/or ‘underemployed’, it soon became apparent that this was impractical given the multiple definitions and overlapping experiences available for these categories. Also, the term *bamboccioni* is so loaded with negative significance that it was almost impossible to use an overt selection criterion. Some respondents self-identified as belonging to this category while others rejected it summarily.

In addition to definitional difficulties, I was aware that the critical paradigm tends to stereotype participants. Thus, according to Scotland, in addition to labelling participants and assigning them to a marginalised group (as in the case of *bamboccioni*), the critical paradigm does not acknowledge the participants’ various levels of conscientiousness and, thus, assumes that they ‘do the bidding of powerful regimes, further enslaving themselves in the process’ (Scotland, (2012, p.14).

Since I wanted to obtain a well-rounded understanding of the phenomena throughout the life-stages of the school-to-work transition, I selected respondents from both countries who varied in age, graduation date, self-acknowledged overeducation and employment status. I categorised them as ‘under’ or ‘over’ 30, like the International Labour Organisation (ILO) using the age of 30 as the cut-off in terms of age-based definitions. What emerged clearly during the interviews was that the physical age was not the key variable that influenced the respondents’ perception of their situation; if they were in a ‘young’ phase of their life (e.g beginning of a new career), they were likely to experience the same challenges as some of the respondents whose age was ‘young’ by ILO definition.

While the ethnographic interviews allowed me to interpret the quantitative statistics in both Italy and the UK, I have used only the Italian interviews as source for my creative writing. Respondents shared a deep sense of anger and resentment against the ruling class in Italy which had failed to find solutions to the plight of youth unemployment. The ruling class (as evidenced through media analysis) responded with scorn and sarcasm. Following Atwood’s guidance about speculative writing, I have thus forced these emotions to their extremes and imagined what could happen in the not so distant future.

Statistics

Given the need to compare data between the UK and Italy to the extent possible, the

statistics on youth unemployment were sourced from the ILO website. To enable triangulation of data, relevant literature was also reviewed, and its findings were extracted and are presented in the findings section.

Comparative research on youth transitions has a number of challenges, among which Walther (2006, pp. 119–139) noted ‘the ambiguous comparability of indicators or the problem of identifying ‘the national’ in the complexity of factors involved in biographical processes’. Therefore these are carefully reviewed in the analysis since the (mis)interpretation of publicly available statistics is one of the core points of the discussion on the disproportionality criterion of moral panic.

Data Management

All interviews were recorded with the participants’ written consent (either via smart phone or via computer-recording software) and then transcribed. The transcriptions provided the data for the discourse analysis. The interviews were backed up in a password-protected file on two computers and on an external hard drive. The articles and memos were backed up both in regular folders and in Evernote, which allowed for file classification and easy memo writing. The bibliography was organised using Refworks.

Data analysis and Reporting

The texts produced during the research process (media articles, interview transcripts, researcher’s log) were analysed using NVivo.

In line with the conventions of critical analysis, the analysis was undertaken from the beginning of the research project, as data emerged, rather than at the end of data collection (Carter and Little, 2007). As Richardson (2000, pp. 923–948) has indicated, ‘writing and reporting in qualitative research are part of the analytic process, in that a researcher’s thinking and interpretation generally develops via the writing process’. Given the dual track of this research, with the novel writing and academic research progressing in parallel, it was often the case that the creative writing process suggested search terms or the academic research prompted ideas for the novel. This is explored further in the self-reflective section of this thesis.

The analysis of the theoretical literature included constant comparison, keyword searches and memo writing. Following the first reading, a number of discourses on

young people were identified. These fed into both the media discourse analysis and the development of the semi-structured interviews. The keywords indicating particular emotions – anger and aboulia – were extracted from the media discourse and used for a close reading of the two novels, *A Clockwork Orange* and *Requiem for a Prolonged Adolescence*.

The interview structure aimed for a maximum duration of one hour to explore the school-to-work experience of each respondent to obtain key insights on the respondents' personal experiences and life choices and to elicit social commentary on the public mono-narrative on youth unemployment.

Brunel's ethical guidelines were thoroughly followed (as evidenced during the PhD annual review meetings). Per the guidelines, informed consent forms were signed and gathered for all interviews represented in this thesis. No personal details were recorded except for gender and nationality, and pseudonyms were used in transcripts to ensure anonymity.

The critical discourse analysis of media articles and interview transcripts explored issues of power and tried to identify what Matheson called those who 'set the terms of their own representation' and those who 'perform a self mapped out by those with power' (cited Cannon 2011, p.7). The emerging themes were extracted to saturation, as indicated by Carter and Little (2007), to avoid confirmation bias in theme selection.

The discourse themes were coded separately for the media analysis and for interview transcripts with the help of NVivo, and then similarities and differences were explored and analysed in light of critical theory. Comparing and contrasting discourse themes that shape the realities of those with power and those without power helped draw insights and conclusions. The insights from these case studies are not statically representative since they are not based on a logic of extrapolation but on a 'logical inference' (Mitchell, 1983, p. 200) that allows the analysis to be valid in the absence of 'the representativeness of events.'

The 'explanatory schema' of this research, which Mitchell refers to in his study, is the framework of moral panic, which holds the analysis together and provides a running thread through the media analysis, the literary analysis and the creative writing in the novel.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Youth: an age-based definition

From a youth unemployment perspective, the official United Nations (2008) and International Labour Organisation (ILO, 2016a) definition for ‘youth’ is 15 to 24 years old. Defining this age bracket allows the ILO to build globally comparable datasets. However, this age bracket is increasingly becoming inadequate, as highlighted by ILO experts in the 2006 report *Global Employment Trends for Youth* (p. 2): ‘the statistical definition of 15 to 24 years may no longer be valid, given that today more and more young people postpone their entry into labour markets to well beyond the age of 25’. Regardless of age boundaries, this stage is characterised by transition from education to employment. The significance of this period in a young person’s life was recognised by the ILO (2006, p. 36) when it stated that the school-to-work transition period was ‘the most significant for determining the economic (and social) well-being of the individual and, if taken collectively, for influencing the level of development of the country’. Recognising that in many cultures young people stay in education beyond the age of 24, the ILO (2010, p. 4) defines the school-to-work transition phase as ‘the passage of a young person (aged 15 to 29 years) from the end of schooling to the first fixed term or satisfactory employment’, while continuing to use the upper limit of 24 years to calculate youth unemployment globally.

Youth: a cultural definition

Different countries may have different cultural definitions of youth, as low as 10 and as high as 30 (ILO, 2006, p. 2), making the availability and comparability of statistics problematic. Specifically for the countries discussed in this thesis, the UK Department of Education (2011) defines youths as those aged between 13 and 19, while in Italy employment policies target different age groups based on region: between 14 and 29 years old in the North and between 14 and 32 years old in the South (ILO, 1997, p.1). Beyond the age-based cultural definition, the ILO concept of transition resonates with what the anthropologist van Gennep (1960) defined as ‘thresholds’ in his seminal work, *The Rites of Passage*. For a young person in a modern Western society, a threshold would typically not be limited to moving out of the parents’ house, getting a job, getting married and having children. The ILO school-to-work transition concept shines a light

on the period before this, or what Turner (1960, p. 46) (elaborating on van Gennep's work) defined as 'betwixt in between' or the 'liminal period in a rite of passage'. Van Gennep (cited in Turner 1960, p.47) defined 'rites of passage' as 'rites which accompany every change of place, state, social position and age', and include three stages: 'separation, margin (or limen) and aggregation'.

Applying this cultural lens to the definition of youth may explain why the attempts to come up with age-based definitions of youth are proving increasingly inadequate in reflecting reality not only for global comparison purposes, but also on an intra-country level. In many societies getting a job does not warrant a young person's transition to adulthood if other rites of passage, such as getting married and/or having children, are not fulfilled as well. However, the latter are often dependent on a young person's financial independence and thus in many cases are delayed until this is attained. As a consequence, a successful transition – not merely to simple employment but instead to stable and rewarding employment – has become the cornerstone of the modern transition to adulthood.

It has been argued that even the concept of a school-to-work transition has become inadequate since increasingly we no longer witness one-directional, linear transitions (implying a point of no return once the transition to employment has taken place) but 'yo-yo' transitions that are, according to Walther and Plug (2006, p.77) 'prolonged but also more fragmented, diversified, and less linear'. Thus, these repeated transitions, 'back and forth between education, employment, and unemployment' (Walther & Plug, 2006, p. 77) leave young people essentially 'somewhere between youth and adulthood' (European Group for Integrated Social Research, 2001, p.101), a modern version of Turner's 'betwixt-and-between'.

When age definitions, statistics based on them and concepts used to show the reality of young people's transition to adulthood are imperfect tools providing a skewed image of reality based on which policies are drafted and implemented, not only are all young people rendered a disservice, but the road is paved for misinterpretation, misunderstanding and miscommunication of the actual state of affairs, often on large scale, mediated by the mass-media.

This has been the case with the two examples of moral panic about young people (the London riots of 2011 in the UK and the *bamboccioni* scandal of 2008 in Italy) that I explore further in my thesis.

Youth: statistical definitions

Youth unemployment

The main indicator – the measure that is most widely publicised – of youth unemployment is the youth unemployment rate, with a common definition put forward by the ILO (1997, p. 1). This indicator is calculated as ‘the number of persons who are unemployed during the reference period given as a percent of the total number of employed and unemployed persons (i.e., the labour force) in the same reference period’ (ILO, 2016). Specifically, this definition refers to all youths aged between 15 and 24 who are available for and actively seeking work (i.e. are part of the labour force) and have reportedly not worked for more than one hour within the past month (the typical reference period). Young people in the labour force represent the economically active population and exclude both those in education and those who are neither in education nor seeking employment.

Public discourse has had a laser focus on youth unemployment and the youth unemployment rate, its imperfect symbol. This has meant that other growing phenomena, such as underemployment and overeducation, have not had a sufficiently high profile in general discourse. The problem with understanding the extent of underemployment and overeducation is not that there are no definitions; it is that there are several definitions, many of which are subjective.

Youth underemployment

According to the ILO (2006, p. 4) report on Global Employment Trends for Youth, ‘underemployment reflects underutilisation of the labour force and has been broadly interpreted to imply any sort of employment that is ‘unsatisfactory’ (as perceived by the workers) in terms of insufficient hours (time-related underemployment), insufficient compensation (income-related underemployment) or insufficient use of one’s skills (skills-related underemployment)’.

Most research on underemployment has focused on time-related underemployment. For instance Tam (2010) looked at the phenomenon of underemployment and overemployment in the UK. This is mainly because time-related underemployment is the only measure whose definition is commonly agreed on by the ILO Conference of Labour Statisticians (2006, p. 5). It refers to a deficiency of working hours, i.e ‘when

the person is willing to engage in more work and is not already working more than a specified number of hours' (Tam, 2010, p. 10).

Youth overeducation

Overeducation has been a phenomenon widely covered by scholars in the US since the 1970s, such as by Tsang and Levin (1985) who warned that overeducation may become a by-product of mass higher education. However, multiple definitions have always prevented a full understanding of the actual extent of overeducation in society.

Rumberger (1981, cited in Tsang & Levin, 1985, p. 93) identified three situations that warranted the label of overeducation: first, if the person in question had under-fulfilled expectations with respect to his or her job; second, if the person had attained a higher educational level than the job required; and third, if the person experienced a decline in his or her economic position relative to historical levels.

Most recently, Groot and Maassen van den Brink (2000) reviewed the literature on overeducation and summarised four definitions, two subjective and two objective, all with limitations. The scholars found that subjective overeducation data has been traditionally acquired via either the self-reporting of skill utilisation or the self-reporting of the required level of education for a new worker in a job. Alternatively, objective data on overeducation has been based on either comparing the years of education attained by a given worker with the average educational level within his or her occupation or by comparing actual educational levels with job-level requirements.

In its 2013 report on Global Employment Trends for Youth, the ILO defined overeducation and undereducation as when 'workers have either more education or less education than is required' (p. 24). What is required is measured based on the International Standard of Classification of Occupations (ISCO), which uses major occupational groups and 'assigns a level of education to each occupational group in accordance with the International Standard Classification of Education' (p. 29). As in the case of time-related underemployment, the ISCO measure of overeducation has been most used by scholars recently, for instance by Sparreboom and Staneva (2014). Having now reviewed the definitions for the concepts that I will use in my thesis, I will now proceed to review the literature on overeducation and underemployment. I will then conclude this section by presenting the framework that underpins moral panic to demonstrate how the inadequacies of definitions and the gaps in public understanding of youth unemployment fuel moral panic about young people.

Literature Review: Theories

Overeducation and underemployment are states experienced by young people in their transition from school to work. A young person can be simultaneously overeducated and underemployed or can experience these states independently of each other. While overeducation can equally affect the unemployed and the employed, underemployment conceptually falls between the two categories but in reality is more often than not captured in employment statistics.

The non-linear trajectory of young people's 'yo-yo' transitions become even more complicated when the concepts of overeducation and underemployment are included since it is no longer only about the school-to-work transition, but also about finding employment commensurate with one's education and with one's time and contractual expectations. From a theoretical perspective, however, the concepts of overeducation and underemployment are treated separately in the literature.

Overeducation Theories

There are multiple theories that attempt to explain overeducation and explore its potential consequences. Budría and Moro – Egido (2009) grouped them into three categories: labour market supply, labour market demand and theories that address both labour market supply and demand.

Labour market supply

The longest-standing theory on the relationship between education and the labour market is Becker's Human Capital Theory (1975). Accounting for fluctuations in labour supply, Sicherman & Galor (1990) built on Becker's theory to develop the Theory of Career Mobility, postulating that workers accept positions for which they know they are overeducated to gain experience – a foot-in-the-door technique. Although disproved by Büchel and Mertens (2001) in the case of those classified as overeducated, the foot-in-the-door technique was fairly popular with the respondents interviewed in this research, particularly those living and working in the UK.

Labour market demand

Labour market demand theories look at the market from the viewpoint of the employer and assume that educational credentials are a signal for employers.

Thus, Thurow's Job Competition Model (1975) hypothesises that educational credentials allow employers to rank applicants relative to each other. The model assumes that education becomes a signal for desired traits, such as capacity to learn. In this model, applicants acquire additional educational credentials (consciously running the risk of overeducation) solely in defence of their relative position in this – perceived – ranking.

A number of scholars have focused on productivity as a presumed key determinant in employers' decision making on candidate selection. Thus, Spence's (1973) Signalling Theory postulated that employers use credentials to distinguish between productive and underproductive workers. This theory was supported by van der Meer and Wielers (1996) and further elaborated on in their Educational Credential Hypothesis, which argued that credentials are the only signal for productivity that employers rely on given the absence of other reliable measures. Finally, drawing on Arrow's Theory of Screening (1973), Stiglitz (2009) argued that individuals labelled productive are processed the same way as commodities in the market. They are thus subject to information screening based on their credentials in the same way markets screen eggs with the help of egg-sorters (p. 31).

With the increase in mass education, however, Brown and Lauder (2006) have noticed that employers find themselves in a position to choose from a large number of highly qualified candidates. Brown and Lauder argue that, to legitimise their decisions, employers increasingly focus on a broader range of employability skills, which are described at length by Brown, et al. (2003), such as drive, resilience and interpersonal sensitivity. Not only do these types of (generally subjective) skills give employers a way to justify candidate selection, but also they are also often used by employers to describe a current, alleged skills gap (for instance in the case of the Skills Gap Narrative, which will be reviewed later in this thesis).

Labour market supply and demand

Berg (1970) was a significant critic of the Human Capital Theory, labelling the gold rush to accumulate human capital stock as 'the great training robbery' in his book by the same name. He debunked the idea that, the more educated a person is, the better

performing they will be on the job and thus the more useful they will be for an employer. His research found no direct relationship between the two variables. Denison (1979), another critic of the Human Capital Theory, showed how it was possible to have both an increase in the educational attainment of young job market entrants and a decline in productivity.

In addition to the assumed positive link between education and productivity, another widely held assumption of the neoliberal market has been that overeducation is a short-term phenomenon. However, Tsang and Levin (1985) were able to demonstrate that overeducation might be a long-term phenomenon.

Although scholarly research has mainly focused on the economic benefits of overeducation, there are a number of scholars who explored the consequences of overeducation on the mental and physical well being of individuals. Without exception, scholars have found that overeducation has a negative impact on the individual who experiences it. Thus, Burriss (1983) found positive associations between over-education and job dissatisfaction. Others, such as Sheppard and Herrick (1972), House (1974) and Quinn & Mandilovitch (1975) found that the overeducated exhibit adverse workplace behaviours, such as absenteeism, high turnover and sabotage, and have poorer health.

Underemployment theories

Research on underemployment has mostly focused on time-related underemployment, including its negative consequences.

Tam (2010), who reviewed the extant literature on this topic, summarised the negative effects of underemployment as being on par with those of unemployment, including effects on income level, welfare dependency and, particularly, low levels of job satisfaction.

From a psychological perspective, the underemployed tend to have lower self-esteem than the employed, as Dooley and Prause (1997) found. Moreover, in a subsequent study, Dooley et al. (2000) demonstrated that changing employment status from employment to underemployment triggered an increase in depression. Though other types of underemployment (e.g. those arising from a shortage of income, a demotion in status or an underutilisation of skills) are significantly under-researched, Friedland and Price (2003) estimated these phenomena to have even worse health and mental consequences for those affected.

In Italy, underemployment has an additional feature, the state experienced by someone with a labour contract that is devoid of social protection. Referred to as '*precarietà*' or 'precariousness' it is a state experienced by a large swathe of the young population in Italy with non-permanent contracts. Italian precariousness has been extensively researched by Murgia and Armano (2011), who found that, though the phenomenon cuts across generational lines, it disproportionately affects the young, especially women.

FINDINGS: LITERATURE REVIEW

Moral panic theoretical framework

Although Stanley Cohen did not invent the concept of moral panic, he first defined it as taking place when ‘a condition, episode, person or group of persons emerges to become defined as a threat to societal values and interest’ (Cohen 1972, p. 9, cited in Goode & Ben Yehuda, 2009, p. 23). Within the same definition, he identified several key characteristics of a moral panic:

- They are stylised and stereotyped by the media.
- ‘[T]he moral barricades are manned by editors, bishops, politicians and other right-thinking people; socially accredited experts pronounce their diagnoses and solutions’.
- ‘[W]ays of coping are evolved or (more often) resorted to’.
- Over time, ‘the condition then disappears, submerges or deteriorates and becomes more visible’.

In their seminal book *Moral Panics: The Social Construction of Deviance*, Goode & Ben-Yehuda (2009) elaborated on this concept and developed a model that Critcher (2003 p. 207) later labelled the ‘attributional model’ to differentiate it from Cohen’s ‘processual model’.

Goode & Ben-Yehuda’s (2009, pp. 37–43) model included the following parameters:

- a. Concern** expressed in ‘measurable ways, such as opinion polls, public commentary in the form of media attention, proposed legislation, social movement activity and so on’.
- b. Consensus** at an ‘unusually high level’ among the members of a community that ‘a problem exists and should be dealt with’.
- c. Hostility** against a group of people, stereotyped as ‘folk devils’, who are perceived as ‘threatening to the values, interests or existence of society’.
- d. Volatility** or ‘fluctuations in levels of social concern over a particular issue’ that is ‘most closely linked to historical context’.
- e. Disproportionality:**
 - ‘The statistics have been exaggerated’;
 - ‘The statistics have been fabricated’;

- The attention paid to condition A is vastly more than the attention paid to condition B, where B is as harmful or more so than A'; or
- 'The attention paid to condition A at time X is vastly more than the attention paid at an earlier or later time Y where there is no change in the objective seriousness of condition A between times X and Y.'

In addition to these five elements, Critcher (2003, p. 207) added the concept of 'claims makers': 'rule creators, who seek to impose their morality and beliefs on others' who are motivated by ideological reasons and rule enforcers who might operate for economic reasons. According to Ungar (2001, pp. 271–291), the third reason why claims makers might operate is for social control. In other words, it is argued that moral panic is orchestrated by claims makers to 'support the dominant ideology'.

In a society with growing inequality and increasing overeducation and underemployment, the dominant ideology about school-to-work transition needs to maintain the illusion that it is young people's individual responsibility to transition smoothly into a labour market; unemployment is seen as deviance and the unemployed are typecast as folk devils, a threat to society itself.

Definition Problems: Youth Unemployment

A case in point starts with the very definition of youth unemployment: the methodological problems of reporting on youth unemployment using the unemployment rate have been extensively covered by researchers and experts (ILO, 1997). However, these criticisms remain largely outside mainstream conversations about youth unemployment, and thus the average news consumer continues to be misled.

A well-articulated summary presented by the Eurostat Statistics (2016) explained:

The youth unemployment rate is misinterpreted as the 'proportion' of unemployed: 'A 25% youth unemployment rate does not mean that '1 out of 4 young persons is unemployed.' This is a common fallacy.'

As a matter of fact, a different indicator measures 'proportion': the youth unemployment ratio, which has 'the same numerator as the youth unemployment rate, but the denominator is the total population aged 15 to 24' (Eurostat, 2016). This widely available measure is virtually absent from public debates on youth unemployment for

reasons that are beyond comprehension. As I will show later in this chapter, these percentages are less dramatic, but closer to how the public interprets the debates around unemployment figures.

The second problem with the way that the rate is calculated is that the size of the denominator (i.e. the number of people identified as being in the labour force) can skew the data significantly. Thus, the use of a small number of young people who are economically active as the denominator can result in a very high unemployment rate, even when the actual number of unemployed is small.

Although these methodological flaws are acknowledged and discussed on the margins, since they are not part of the mainstream conversation, their actual implications for public discourse are seldom evident. Unemployment rates are taken at face value and blasted via mass media in a hyperbolic way that directly contributes to moral panic, as I will show in this thesis. Specifically, in the next section, I will unpack the implications of using the unemployment rate rather than unemployment ratio in the portrayal of youth unemployment in the UK and Italy, using ILO and Eurostat statistics.

Definition Problems: Youth Underemployment and Youth Overeducation

There are no globally comparable statistics for youth underemployment or youth overeducation, largely because of a lack of common definition and methodology. However, between 2006 and 2016, there was an interesting evolution in the way the ILO presented these two topics in its flagship report *Global Youth Employment Trends*. Specifically, in 2006, the share of those ‘underemployed’ among the young was identified under the section ‘what we don’t know’, with the rationale that these individuals span both the economically active and the economically inactive among the youth population (ILO, 2006, p. 5). There is no mention of ‘overeducation’ in this report; however, one of Rumberger’s (1981) definitions of overeducation, ‘the possession of greater educational skills than their jobs require,’ can be found under the reference ‘invisible underemployment based on skills mismatch’ (ILO, 2006, p. 44). In the ILO 2016 report, underemployment is barely mentioned and is incorporated into the phrase ‘hidden in self-employment and casual wage employment’ (p. 30). By contrast, overeducation, now balanced by the phenomenon of undereducation, is accompanied by European Union (EU)-level statistics that include Italy and the UK, which will be presented in the next section.

Youth Labour Market Overview for Italy and the UK

This section presents an overview of official statistics regarding youth unemployment, using official data from the ILO and Eurostat websites. This overview shows how the definitional problems outlined above directly contribute to a distorted perception of the phenomenon in both the UK and Italy.

Youth unemployment rate trends

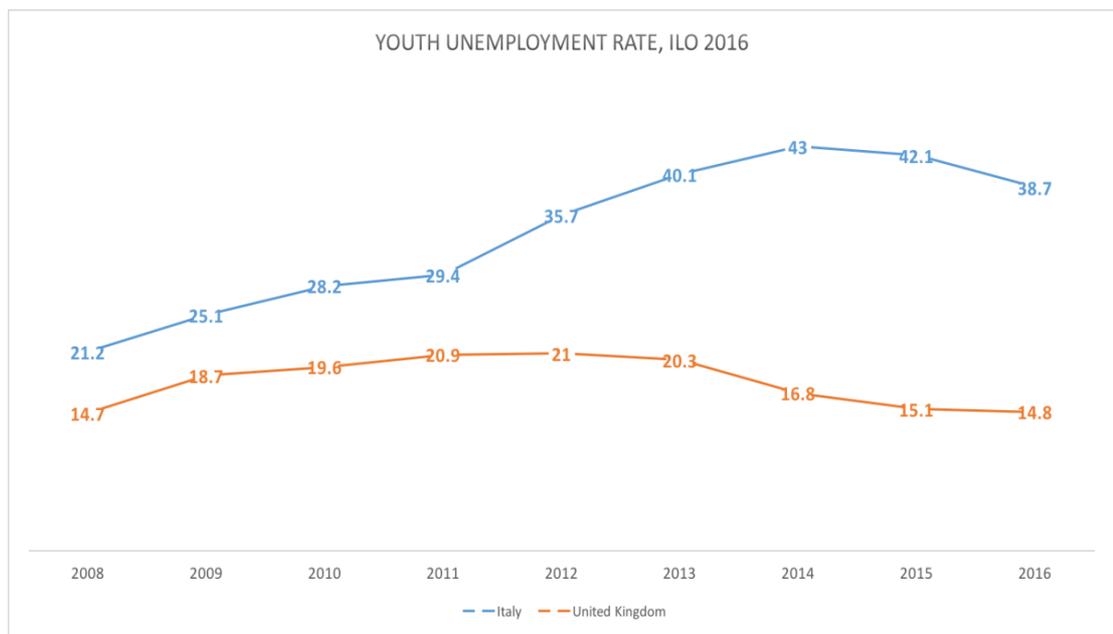


Figure 1 Youth unemployment rate, ILO 2016 data

The comparative percentages representing the youth unemployment rate in Figure 1 show the familiar fork-to-mouth image presented in the mass media. They appear to show Italian youth unemployment to be roughly double that of the UK (see The Guardian, 2011b; BBC, 2013; La Stampa, 2014).

Youth unemployment ratio trends

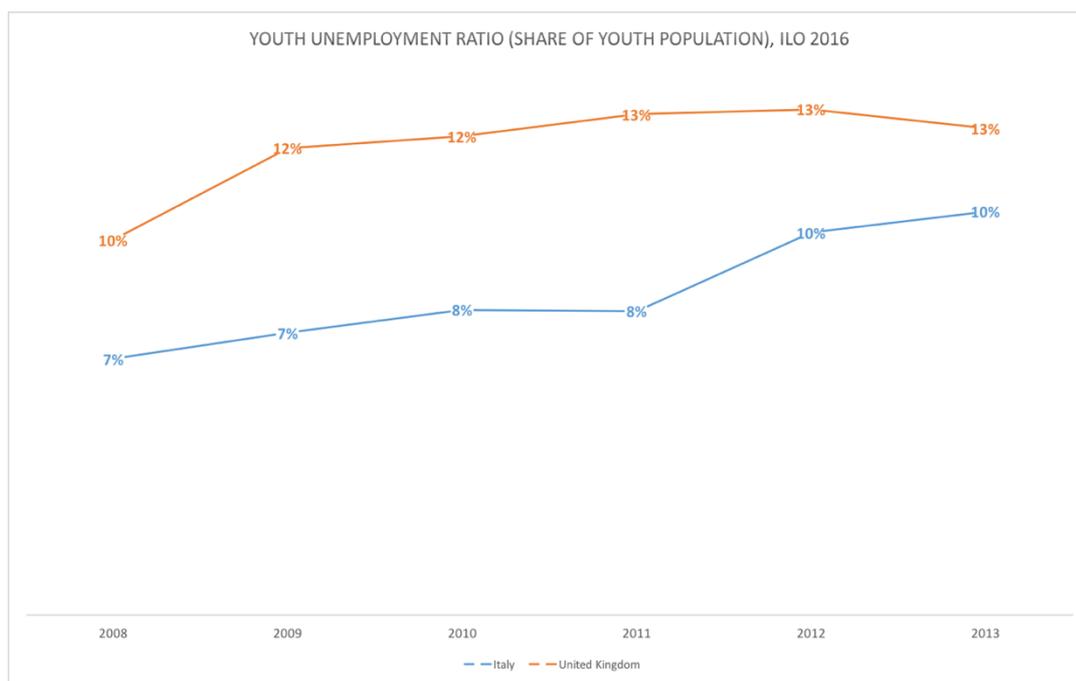


Figure 2 Share of unemployed youth in the 15 to 24 population, ILO data (author's calculation)

However, when the number of unemployed as a share of the population aged 15 to 24 is calculated to identify the proportion within the correlated demographic segment (i.e. the youth unemployment ratio), the picture of unemployment is completely different: The UK's situation is worse than that of Italy's. This reversed image has also been shown by Eurostat (2015).

This image is not the one that the mass media projects, at least via newspapers. Whether it's due to confirmation bias (this image does not resonate with the accepted narrative) or because it is not dramatic enough to be newsworthy, the reality is that Italy has a lower share than the UK of young people 15–24 who are officially unemployed according to the ILO definition.

Number of unemployed youth

The discrepancy between the rate (Fig. 1) and ratio (Fig. 2) occurs because of the problem identified in the definition section: the denominator, which is based on the labour force participation rate, is much lower in Italy than in the UK. Traditionally, the size of the economically active population has been smaller in Italy than the UK. Furthermore, the youth population in Italy – about six million aged 15 to 24 according

to ILO 2016 demographic data (ILO Population Statistics, 2016) – is approximately one-quarter smaller than the UK youth population, which stands at nearly eight million. Thus, even when taking into consideration the actual number of young people unemployed, the following chart shows that the UK has a larger number of unemployed young people.

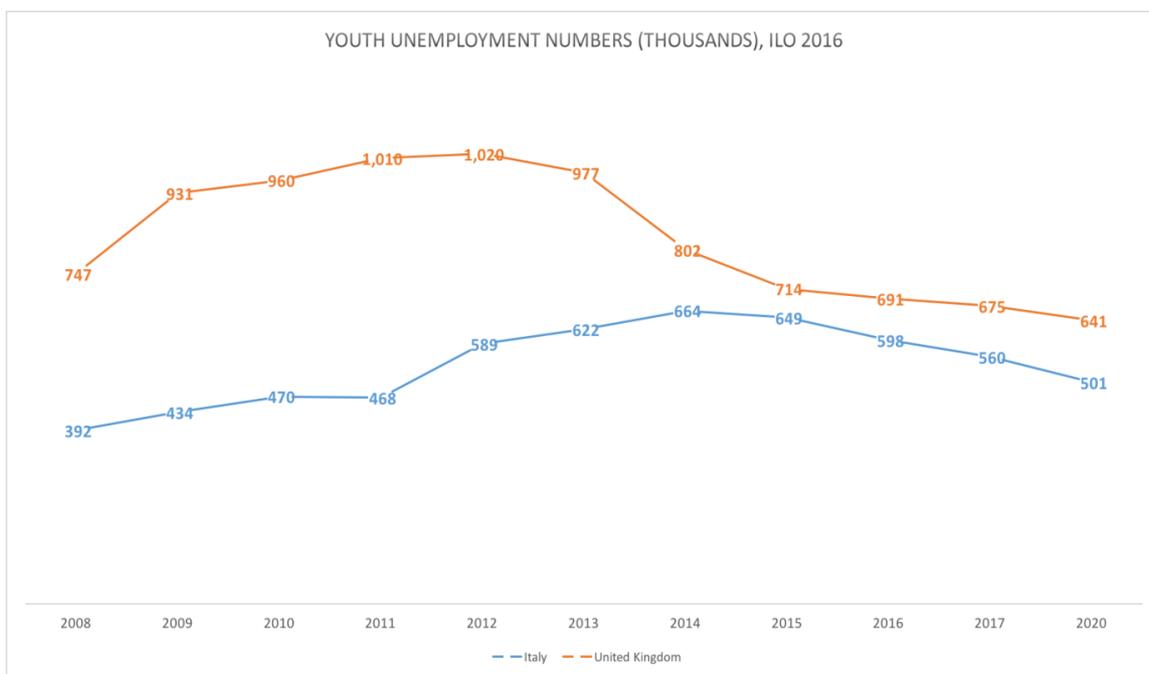


Figure 3 Number (thousands) of unemployed 15 to 24 year olds, ILO 2016 data and projections

As highlighted above, in 2012, at the height of the moral panic about youth unemployment, the UK had nearly double the number of young unemployed as Italy (1.02 million versus 0.59 million).

Trends in Mass Higher Education, Overeducation and Underemployment

Mass higher education trend

One of the more influential theories of the dynamic between education and the labour market is Becker's (1975) seminal work *Human Capital: A Theoretical and Empirical Analysis, with Special Reference to Education*, which built on the work of other human capital theorists, such as Schultz (1961) and Denison (1962). Throughout the better part of the last half-century, the fundamental principle underpinning Becker's theory – that increasing human capital leads to higher productivity and, consequently, to economic

growth – has buoyed government policies and worldviews. Tsang and Levin (1985, p. 96) showed how ‘this assumed relationship [between education and economic growth] has been used as a basis for public policies to increase the rate of productivity growth through educational investment’.

The ‘Education for All’ movement of the early 1990s (UNESCO, 2016) was the global expression of this implied link between education and economic growth. This was the turning point when all countries embarked on a race for education, with poor countries struggling to achieve universal literacy and developed countries striving to increase their shares of highly educated individuals. The driving assumption behind this race for mass higher education was the expectation, according to Lauder et al. (2012), that countries that invested in higher education and developed their research and development potential would eventually attract both top talent and highly paid jobs. In the early 2000s, the ‘get educated and everything will be fine’ slogan was still a ‘major plank in European policy’, as Beduwe and Planas (2003, p. 11) found in a comparative study, mainly because educational expansion had been pursued ‘without large-scale de-skilling nor a dramatic fall in salaries’.

Warning bells were sounded a few years later by Brown and Lauder (2006, p. 29), who argued that the presumed unshakable law firmly rooted in human capital theory was more of a ‘transitional case’ without guarantees. Others raised issues with the equity underlying the quest for education for all, with such sociologists as Shavit and Bar-Haim (2007, pp. 37–57) arguing that there is an inherent inequality in mass higher education since credentials have unequal value on the labour market depending on the issuing institution. In addition to this, in Italy, given that intra-generational social mobility was rather low, social origins remained important in determining individuals’ positions in their first jobs (Contini and Scagni, 2012).

In the context of Human Capital Theory, the individual is treated as a rational being with full information about the market and is ‘assumed to invest in higher education until the marginal rate of return from additional education is equal to some market rate of return’ Galper & Dunn, 1969, p. 766). In this paradigm, overeducation is perceived to be a short-term phenomenon that will eventually be regulated by the market.

The return on educational investment has taken on mythical overtones in the collective imagination, fuelled, though not exclusively, by the concentration of available research on this topic. Thus, Smith (1986, p. 91) showed that the overwhelming majority of literature on Human Capital Theory from an economic perspective focused on ‘the variation in the relative income returns to higher education’. In this context, Cingano

and Cipollone (2009, p. 7), in a study conducted on behalf of the Bank of Italy, indicated that the private return on investment in education was 9%, which was ‘higher than alternative financial investments’.

However, there is an invisible line between adequate education and overeducation, which many young people cross without the possibility of rewinding their experience. This is a situation with clear financial consequences: Budría and Moro-Egido (2009, p. 331) found consistently, across several different studies, that ‘the return to surplus education is 50% less than the return to required education’.

Recently, Hansen (2011) found that most European countries, with the notable exception of Germany, are dealing with mass higher education. He argued that there is still considerable work to be done to understand the relationships among the global, national and local labour markets, given that countries have different industrial structures and thus the relationships between their educational and labour markets are also different. This view is particularly interesting in the context of the North–South framing of public discourse, which opposes the way that countries such as the UK and Germany, (which have different economic structures than, for example, Italy and Spain), address youth unemployment.

According to the most recent Eurostat (2010) website data, among the EU-28, Italy had the largest number of enterprises in the non-financial business economy (3,868) but with an average of only four employees per enterprise. This employment number represents one of the lower in the EU, particularly when compared with the UK’s 11 employees per enterprise and Germany’s 12. These data show that the Italian economy is highly fragmented, with a large number of family-owned businesses that do not accommodate middle management. This situation limits the entry-level career options available to young people.

However, as many researchers have indicated, the demand side of the school-to-work transition has been little scrutinised. In terms of demand, the delocalisation of labour has dominated public discourse, fuelled by the widespread assumption that low-skilled jobs were being lost and/or outsourced but high-paying jobs were not under threat. (Veugelers, 2012)

In this context, given the apparent general consensus that more education leads to more economic growth, the rise in unemployment and the phenomenon of overeducation among young people during the economic crisis of 2008 was a shock to the system. Lauder et al. (2012) noted that the crisis put an end to what they called the ‘fairy tale’ that the increase in high-paying jobs globally would never end.

Fingers began to point to the higher education system itself, which had seemingly become bloated, with an increase in enrolment of approximately ten percentage points in Western Europe and North America between 2000 and 2007 (UNESCO, 2009). The financial crisis made things even worse through a phenomenon that is explained in economic terms as the ‘inflationary’ effect of the rise in the level of education or the ‘paradox of overeducation’ (Beduwe & Planas, 2003, p. 52):

[A] fall in the overall demand for labour (and a rise in unemployment, especially among young people) leads, all other things being equal, to an increase in the numbers continuing in education and hence to a rise in the level of the supply and vice versa. The supply of and demand for initial education and training will thus be cyclical in inverted phases.

Despite Brown and Lauder’s (2006, p. 34) warning that ‘against a backdrop of mass higher education, the dominant discourse overestimates the extent to which even the most successful nations within the global economy can create mass high-skilled employment’, the public rhetoric zoomed in on the Skills Gap, a new slogan that highlighted both the inadequacy of higher educational institutions in producing the right type of commodity for the labour market and the shortcomings of individual young people in choosing educational paths that would enhance their employability. In a front-page *TIME* editorial entitled ‘The Jobless Generation’ (with the tagline ‘Tens of millions of young people are unemployed. How to get them jobs before they become unemployable – and erupt in fury’), Schuman (2012) said: ‘Solving the problem of youth unemployment will require attacking its core causes. In many countries, schools simply are not preparing students for the labour market’. He argues that, ‘too often, students choose courses of study that are mismatched with the needs of the economy.’ Thus, he implied that if only universities and the labour market were more connected and if only students would choose the right types of degrees, then unemployment would be solved. Other opinion pieces echoed the sentiment:

The schooling system and higher education system here in the UK is in the firing line. We need to ask if the education system is giving our young people what they need to get the best possible chance in the working world. It feels at times that there is little correlation between the education system and the job market. (Paul, 2012, *Youth Unemployment and the Lost Generation*, The Huffington Post)

Against this background, the skills-gap narrative gained momentum. The dominant employers' view on the subject was cemented via the McKinsey Report on Education and Employment, which had the full support of the European Commission and was launched by Vassiliou (2014), the European Commissioner for Education, Culture, Multilingualism and Youth at the time.

Even though Brown and Lauder (2006) had argued that politicians were facing a failed theoretical model and that the only tools at their disposal were unsubstantiated promises of job creation, the demand part of the market continued to remain above suspicion in public discourse. Brown and Lauder showed that, even high-wage, high-skill markets, following cycles of rapid growth economies underwent a process of 'standardisation' due to technological innovation, which saw these high-end jobs 'delocalised' in order to be 'routinized and undertaken cheaply' (Brown & Lauder, 2006, p. 29). Even in the face of evidence that high-end jobs (e.g. research and development) were shifting to developing markets where they could be filled for a fraction of the cost in developed markets, few paid attention.

More specifically, while politicians were focused on home markets, treating issues such as demographics, education, labour markets and migration in isolation, Brown and Lauder (2006) looked at graduate education and labour market transitions from the perspective of globalisation. They concluded:

[A] paradox of the knowledge economy is that 'human capital' is increasingly subject to the laws of diminishing returns as more people gain access to tertiary education both at home and abroad, and knowledge workers in the developed economies are forced to compete with well-educated employees willing to work for much lower incomes in developing economies. (p.49)

Moreover, Lauder et al. (2012, p. 121) argued that world economies were confronted with a 'global auction for jobs', according to which:

[L]ow-skilled jobs will be auctioned on price and will tend to migrate to low-waged economies such as those in Asia or Eastern Europe while high-skilled jobs will continue to attract higher wages. These will be assessed on quality rather than price.

However, being open to a global auction for high-paying jobs necessitates accepting a system that operates like a Dutch (or reverse) auction, which according to Brown and Lauder (2006) allows corporate investors to play nations, communities and workers off each other as bidding spirals downwards and multinational companies win concessions. About the same time that the Human Capital Theory was proposed, a number of researchers criticized educational institutions as places that served economic instead of educational functions (Kozol, 1967; Reimer, 1972). In *Deschooling Society*, Illich (1971, p. 41) argued that the school system produces standardised consumers for the market economy. He believed that the school system is ‘the main social instrument for conditioning individuals toward passive, consumerist behaviour’, arguing that it ‘transformed learning from a satisfying and voluntary activity into the compulsive pursuit of a commodity for which the school itself monopolises the market’ (pp. 41–47). Nevertheless, swept away by the promises of the Human Capital Theory, which had been drip-fed through public discourse for years, young people enrolled in droves in tertiary education, as noted earlier.

Beyond the rhetoric, it is worth noting the educational statistics related to tertiary education at the national level in Italy and the UK. According to the website Eurostat (2015), Italy had the lowest share of 25 to 54 year olds with tertiary education among the EU-28 countries (19.1%), and the UK was in fifth place, sandwiched between Finland (45%) and Sweden (42.7%). Even in Germany, a country thought to be outside the mass higher education market (Hansen, 2011), the share stood at 28.3%, much higher than in Italy.

When compared intra-generationally, Italian young people are considered more educated; however, when they are compared with young people (or, for the most part with people of any generation) in other countries at the European level, this is clearly not the case. Thus, Eurostat statistics show that, among 30 to 34 year olds, Italy ranked last among the EU-28 (25.3% have tertiary education); meanwhile, the UK ranked sixth (47.7%) (Eurostat, 2015). The percentage of people with tertiary degrees is 150% higher among 30 to 34 year-olds in Italy (25.3%) than among individuals aged 55 to 74 (10.4%), while in the UK it is only 50% higher (47.7% among 30 to 34 year-olds versus 31.9% for those over 55 years old) according to (Eurostat, 2015).

Analysing tertiary education as enrolment per 100,000 inhabitants adds an historical perspective that takes into consideration demographic fluctuations. Thus, UNESCO (2016) statistics showed enrolment in tertiary education in both Italy and the UK to be

in the middle of the global bell curve when calculated as an overall demographic rather than as share of a cohort (which is measured by the gross ratio and the net enrolment rate and yields unhelpful high percentages). The country with the highest tertiary education enrolment in the world is South Korea: 6,705 people per 100,000 inhabitants in 2013. The UK ranked 47th with 3,731 people, while Italy ranked 63rd with 3,133 people. Both the UK and Italy experienced peaks during the financial crisis, and in both cases enrolment levels have since dropped back to their early 2000s levels. Female enrolment in tertiary education has increased over the past decade in both Italy and the UK.

Given the above statistics, neither the Eurostat nor the UNESCO data warrant the scapegoating of tertiary educational systems, especially in Italy, where the baseline of tertiary education achievement is very low by any standard. With such a low output of tertiary graduates, Italy should not experience overeducation, yet Meliciani (2016, p. 3) found overeducation there to be ‘surprisingly high’ (in 2014, 20.7% self-reported that ‘their level of schooling was not necessary for their job’).

Starting in 2013, a new trend emerged: London became the top destination for Italian emigration, replacing Germany (this is discussed in detail in the section analysing mass-media articles). Young Italians’ choice to flee rather than fight is a coping mechanism consistent with the findings of Burris (1983), whose research showed that, when faced with the cognitive dissonance of overeducation and underemployment, young people are more likely to ‘privatise’ their discontent than to act it out in a political way. He argued that ‘the continued privatisation of discontent was likely to lead either to self-blame (low self-esteem, symptoms of psychological stress, etc.) or to individual adaptation through the redefinition of status (elevating the importance of family, leisure and non-work activities)’ (Burris, 1983, p. 465). Through these empirical findings, Burris (1983) disproved the common prediction of radicalisation among the overeducated, yet this remains a latent concern that is exacerbated via the media during moral panics.

Overeducation trends

In the past few years, researchers have started to pay more attention to trends in overeducation in the context of overall increase in mass higher education globally. Enrolment in higher education has expanded in the UK at a very high rate in keeping with a government policy aiming ‘to bring 50% of a cohort to higher education’

(Chevalier, 2003, p. 510). Between 1981 and 1991, there was a 42% increase in tertiary education enrolments, and in the early 1990s the number of young people accessing higher education doubled, reaching 33% of a cohort by the early 2000s (Dolton & Vignoles, 2000). According to Chevalier and Lindley (2009, p. 17), as a consequence of this massive expansion, ‘the probability of overeducation has doubled compared with the pre-expansion cohort, reaching as much as 35% of graduates’.

In terms of trends, the most recent ILO report on overeducation showed that one in five young people are considered overeducated in the UK (increasing from 9.4% in 2002 to 21% in 2012), while the data for Italy showed a slight increase from 4.5% in 2002 to 5.3% in 2004 (ILO 2015, p.87). Other researchers have found that overeducation in the UK ranged from 10% to 42% (Groot & Maassen van den Brink, 2000) and from 29% to 47% (Chevalier, 2003). However, according to McGuinness (2006), ‘the rate of growth seemed particularly rapid for graduates in the Arts and Humanities’ (p.414).

As far as Italy is concerned, as Di Pietro and Urwin (2006) highlighted, very little research has focused on the extent of overeducation. The authors use proxy indicators derived from an analysis of Italian national statistics (ISTAT, 1997–2003) to suggest that the incidence of overeducation among Italian graduates has increased significantly over the second half of the 1990s. Thus, they argue that ‘Italian university education does not seem to enhance employment prospects as much as in other countries of the OECD’, with Italian graduate unemployment standing at roughly twice the OECD average (Di Pietro & Urwin, 2006, p. 2).

Most recently, Budría and Moro-Egido (2009) developed a new theoretical framework for overeducation within the broad worker population based on two self-reported measures. They considered the overeducated to be those who affirm that they a) have the ‘skills or qualifications to do a more demanding job’ and b) have not had any necessary training for their present job (p.335). According to Budría and Moro-Egido’s (2009) definition, overeducation in Italy stands at 30.35% – the highest among European countries – while in the UK it stands at 19.42% and the European average is 21.92%. Interestingly, taking into consideration only the answers to the first question, a measure that the scholars labelled ‘overqualified’, only 48.46% of Italian workers self-reported being overqualified compared with 68.26% of UK workers.

Underemployment trends

In the past few years, researchers and the media have paid increasing attention to underemployment, with more newspaper headlines signalling that underemployment is on the rise and that its effects are equally bad as those of unemployment.

Tam's (2010) research on underemployment in the UK between 2001 and 2010 showed a gradual decline in underemployment until 2005, when it began to increase.

Traditionally, overemployment has been higher than underemployment; however, this trend was reversed during the 2009 recession, when for the first time there were more underemployed workers than overemployed workers in the UK.

According to the OECD (2016) statistical databases, in 2013 there were 222,000 young people aged 15 to 24 who could be classified as involuntary part-time workers (time-related underemployed) in Italy, compared with 381,000 in the UK. Between 2000 and 2013, the number of young underemployed doubled in Italy and nearly tripled in the UK.

As the OECD (2016) statistics show, in terms of percentages the situation in Italy was significantly worse. The share of time-related underemployed among total youth employment was 24.6% in Italy versus 8.4% in the UK. Even worse, nearly all young part-timers were actually underemployed. Thus, in 2013, 83.3% of 15- to 24-year-old part-timers in Italy were involuntary part-timers, a whopping increase from 54.6% in 2000. They are experiencing the contractual precariousness described previously in the definition section.

The OECD (2016) statistics also showed that in the UK the share of time-related underemployed among young part-timers doubled between 2000 and 2013, rising from 11.4% to 22.1%. However, these numbers remain significantly below those in Italy.

The first attempt to provide a comprehensive view of underemployment in the UK was undertaken by Professors David Bell and David Blanchflower in 2013. They compiled an underemployment index and published their report in the *National Institute Economic Review* to show that '[t]here has been such a dramatic increase in underemployment that the unemployment rate is now a poorer indicator of the degree of slack in the labour market than it has been in the recent past' (Bell & Blanchflower, 2013, p. F8). As noted by Chakraborty (2013):

[W]e're conditioned by previous slumps to think of the victims as those who just can't find work [...] but the face of this depression is the shop

worker on a zero-hours contract, the part-timer who can't go full-time, the self-employed consultant whose phone hasn't rung for days. Nominally, these people are in work; in reality, they don't consider that they have a working income.

Specifically in the 16–24 age group in the UK, Bell and Blanchflower (2013, p. F17) showed that not only was the unemployment rate 21.6 per cent (highest among all age groups), 'but the shortfall of hours [...] increased the underemployment index by a further 8.4 per cent'.

Overall, in 1992 the 'number of people forced to work part-time because they have not been able to find full-time work was at its highest level since records began' (Bennett, 2013). Thus, the decline in unemployment rates are 'hiding the fact that more and more workers are taking part-time or temporary contracts because they can't get anything else', affirmed Jacob Mohun, economist at The New Economics Foundation, who was quoted in the same article.

Concluding Remarks

The subjectivity and diversity of definitions of overeducation and underemployment, as well as available statistics, have been criticised for tending to 'reflect what the employers say they want, not what is actually required to do the job' (Groot & Maassen van den Brink, 2000, pp. 149–158). Although the theories presented above in the literature review chapter postulate that the market regulates supply and demand, Groot and Maassen van den Brink (2000) recorded that, faced with an oversupply of qualified candidates, employers' tendency is to upgrade the educational requirements for various jobs.

It is thus evident from research findings that the power to define the dominant narrative rests overtly with employers, who are able to use statistics to frame the narrative to benefit their agenda. Their voice is amplified by the mass media. An example of this is the skills-gap narrative, which puts pressure on the supply side of the market – that is, the quality of education and the employability of young people.

Notably, in 2014 the skills-gap narrative was debunked by Cappelli (2014) in a meta-analysis that explored the US labour market. Although this analysis does not include research on the European market, the methodologies of research in both US and European markets are similar and rely heavily on employers' self-reported perception of

graduates' skills. Thus, the findings can be considered insightful for both the UK and Italian labour markets, although specific research should be conducted in these countries.

The American professor Cappelli affirmed:

[T]here is very little evidence consistent with the complaints [mainly by 'employer-associated organizations but also from independent and even government sources making similar claims'] about skills and a wide range of evidence suggesting that they are not true. Indeed, a reasonable conclusion is that overeducation remains the persistent and even growing situation of the US labor force with respect to skills'. (pp. 280–284)

In his paper, Cappelli (2014) highlighted the conflict of interest of those claiming that the skills gap is real and concluded that the narrative is driven by employers whose aim is to reduce staffing costs in the short-term and to shift costs to the taxpayer in the longer-term.

In the moral panic narrative, the claims makers are the power holders. In this case, those who have the power to offer and reward work – employers – have an intrinsic conflict of interest when they make claims about the type of skills needed for a particular job, especially when there is subjectivity in how these skills are measured and thus low accountability.

Brown and Lauder (2006) have also concluded that there is a particular asymmetry of focus on what matters in the labour market. Their argument is that 'the focus on individual employability (supply side) rather than political commitment to job creation (demand side) is a political sleight of hand that shifts the responsibility for employment firmly on the shoulders of individuals rather than the state' (pp. 25–57), confirming that the mono-narrative regarding youth unemployment and the relevant asymmetry of responsibility prevalent in public discourse needs to be challenged.

My novel draws on this research in a number of ways, for example:

1. A cut-off age: I have introduced the idea of a cut-off age in order to mirror the ILO's arbitrary definition of youth, that does not take into account cultural and sociological aspects of young age;
2. Utility: I have classified young people in my novel into three categories: Breeders, Pre-Civicos and Bodies, to illustrate the stigma connected to

unemployment; in the world of my novel, there is no place for Juveniles who do not fit one of these categories; everybody is 'used' one way or another;

3. The Gerontocrats' complete control of information channels, that have been surgically inserted into young people's bodies, is a fictional way of illustrating how mass media is used today to manipulate public perception of young people.

FINDINGS: MASS MEDIA ANALYSIS

Portrait of the Young as Deviant

The modern mass media representation of young people in a liminal state, of which the most extreme case is the young unemployed, did not start with a clean slate in terms of historical representation.

Numerous researchers have shown that young people have long been portrayed by the media in a negative light. Cannon (2011) reviewed extant literature on the representation of deviant youth in the media since the 1960s and found that, after 1963, not only did the coverage of youth-related issues increase in the UK, but an atmosphere of 'unease' surrounded them. Ever since, casting young people as villains has had a tsunami effect, with Michael Welch et al. remarking that the moral panic about deviant youth has engulfed even 'innocent youth', who 'have become a figure of public fear, anger and anxiety' (Welch et al., 2002, cited in Cannon, 2011, p. 4).

This use of the word 'innocent' invites the application of Douglas's (1966, p. 115) concepts of 'sacred', 'clean' and 'unclean', which she argued were at the core of 'boundary creation' in societies. Thus, in today's societies, we seem to reserve the 'sacred' for those young people who have transitioned smoothly to adulthood and who have completed all the anthropological stages mentioned earlier. The 'clean' are those young people who have completed some, but not all of the stages and who are largely unproblematic from a societal perspective. The 'unclean' are deviant youth.

Traditionally, criminality has been at the forefront of youth deviance, with unemployment somewhere in the background. However, increasingly, the status of unemployment has become the focus of youth deviance, as I show below.

The boundary between 'unemployed' and 'employed', however unstable, has redefined 'unclean' and 'clean/sacred', with the latter becoming the gold standard for successful transition into adulthood. Thus, Beck (1993, p. 140, cited in Bessant, 1995, p. 38) highlighted that 'even outside of work, industrial society is a wage labour society through and through ... in its concept of achievement, in its justification of inequality, in its social welfare laws, in its balance of power and in its politics and culture'. Despite this pervasive state of affairs, Bessant (1995, p. 38) perceptively showed that what was essentially a 'labour problem' in the 1970s was reframed as a 'youth problem', even if the concept of 'full adult male employment' was no longer realistic.

Yet, as Bessant (1995, p. 6) found, the ‘naturalness’ of the link between crime and youth unemployment has gone unchallenged. And if it can be said that academia is overwhelmingly looking at youth unemployment through an economics lens, and thus has a narrow view of the phenomenon, this is even truer of mass media. Multiple discourse analyses of print media have revealed that the labels and metaphors used to describe young people are by no means benign. As Cannon’s (2011, p. 4) review showed, based on a Women in Journalism study, the most common words used in British mass media to describe youth between 2008 and 2009 were ‘yobs’, ‘thugs’, ‘hoodies’ and ‘louts’. Elsewhere, disease-related metaphors and animal and dehumanising discourse have been employed (Fauscher 2009, cited in Cannon, 2011, p. 11).

In my novel, I have used this stigmatisation to portray Juveniles as ‘unclean’ as a population that needs to be contained in a Juvenile quarter, in dorms, with a population that needs to be controlled and managed. The Brigades are portrayed as angry and violent although in a State controlled information system, it is difficult to know what is real and what is hyped for propaganda purposes.

Not only was the qualitative aspect distorted, but the quantitative one was subject to hyperbole. Thus, despite a statistical decrease in youth criminality, Cannon’s (2011) literature review showed both an overwhelming (75%) belief among the British public that ‘youth crime was on the increase’ (p. 4) and that the biggest fear adults have is to ‘become a victim of juvenile crime,’ although young people commit only 10% of all crimes in the UK (Dorfman & Schiraldi, 2001p. 3).

Starting in the 1980s, Bessant (1995, p. 5) noted that unemployment had become the bulls’ eye of criminality in academic, policy and media discourse. She reviewed various classical deviance theories and drew on Foucault’s view that ‘power lies in the capacity to shape the ways reality gets talked about and known’ (p. 11) to argue that, fundamentally, the use of categories such as ‘unemployed’ and ‘deviant’ was merely a tool for yielding power, not least because ‘the framing of problems prepares the way for the development of policy solutions’ (p. 5).

Media Analysis: Diagnoses of Moral Panics in the UK and Italy

Charles Krinsky argued that the moral panic framework is effective when it comes to explaining ‘exaggerated or imaginary social crises’ (Krinsky, 2008, p. 256). The media focus on young people in both Italy and the UK, especially those who do not fit the

idealised model of transition to employment, has escalated into moral panic in both countries in the past decade. Instead of reporting on the growing phenomenon of overeducation and underemployment among youth, which together with unemployment is the real social crisis, the media have drawn the public's attention to unemployment in an exaggerated and negative fashion.

Thus Bessant (1995) found that, since 1975, claims about unemployed, poverty-stricken young people 'at risk' have proliferated. However, she demonstrated that there had been a shift in how the public viewed the link between deviance and young people, with the opposite view being held in the 1950s: in contrast to the 1990s, in the 1950s 'the delinquency problem was frequently explained in terms of the 'too-easy access' young people had to work and high incomes and their subsequent buying power. The prosperity of parents was also to blame' (p.17).

Italy: The *Bamboccioni* (*Puer Aeternus*)

Methodology

I used a keyword search ('*bamboccioni*'; '*disoccupazione giovanile*') to identify surges in media interest related to youth unemployment since 2007 and selected online newspaper articles that quoted Italian politicians labelling Italian youth in a stereotypical fashion.

Although over the course of the past eight years there has been constant coverage of young people's situation in the labour market, there are two surge periods – 2007 and 2012 – that, as I will demonstrate, qualify as moral panics. I analyse these below using discourse analysis.

Discourse analysis: Italian young people

Bessant (1995, p. 30) showed how the image of the jobless youth as deviant 'draws on age old fantasies and fears about idle youth'. There is no better illustration of the concept of idle youth in Italy than the *bamboccione*.

The stereotypical image of the Italian youth as *bamboccioni* was coined in 2007 by the then minister of the economy, Tommaso Padoa-Schioppa, who in a budgetary committee meeting urged Italians to 'Let the bamboccioni get out of their family's house!' (*Corriere della Sera*, Redazione, 2007a).

Although he did not invent the term, Padoa-Schioppa became infamous for uttering the

most prominent label for young people in Italy, to the point that even his 2010 obituary in the Italian press referenced this incident. Padoa-Schioppa's comment was made in the context of his introduction of a financial act that was meant to offer rent subsidies to young people age 20 to 30, which according to analysts' scrutiny, were not nearly enough to cover independent rents.

In his statement he defined *bamboccioni* as 'young people who live with their parents, do not get married and do not become autonomous'. Elsewhere, *bamboccioni* has been translated as 'unemployed, unemployable and lazy youth' (I-Italy, 2012b).

Concern

Padoa-Schioppa's comment sparked an immediate reaction in Italian society, which the Italians call *polemica*, characterising an issue that is heavily contested and debated. Politicians took sides, young people took sides and public opinion was divided. Young people protested the indiscriminate use of the term ('reacted furiously' as quoted in *I-Italy* (2007a)), arguing that not everyone who lived with their parents should be called *bamboccioni*, given that some have precarious incomes and cannot afford to rent. A fellow politician, Manuela Palermi, took young people's side and denounced the term, emphasising that banks do not give mortgages to those who are underemployed (precarious), and thus the label 'is not supported by a sociological analysis' (*Corriere della Sera*, Redazione, 2007a). Walter Veltroni, then mayor of Rome, had a middle-of-the-road reaction in *Corriere della Sera*, calling the phrase an 'unfortunate witty remark' and expressing his support for the 'courageous' young who face an uncertain future (2007b).

However, national cultural treasures such as Umberto Eco joined the side of the accusers in an article for *L'Espresso* entitled 'Bamboccioni Crucified', arguing that young people who are educated do not want to 'lower themselves' to undertake 'humble jobs' in order to become independent, 'unlike young people in the United States' (Eco, 2007, *L'Espresso* online).

Consensus

Not everyone agreed whether the *bamboccione* really existed and whether having only one characteristic was enough to qualify someone as a *bamboccione*. The debate regarding characteristics continued well into 2014 when *Vanity Fair* published an article entitled 'Are You a Bamboccione?' (2014).

What everyone seemed to agree on, based on the evidence, was that a large proportion of young Italians were living with their parents. At the time, 61.7% of Italians aged 18 to 34 were doing so, second after Malta among EU-28 countries, according to Eurostat (2007) statistical data. So, on that characteristic alone, nearly two-thirds of Italians would have fallen in the *bamboccione* category.

Hostility

The hostility against the ‘folk devil’ stereotyped as the *bamboccione* is illustrated by the suite of labels young Italians have been given since the *bamboccioni* incident, including during several after-shocks of moral panic.

In response to a court ruling in Bergamo that forced a 60-year-old father to maintain his 32-year-old daughter who was still at university after eight years of study, the then minister of public administration, Renato Brunetta, called for a law ‘to enforce that all 18 year olds should leave their parents’ homes’ in an article in *La Stampa* (2010) entitled ‘Brunetta Against the Bamboccioni’. He had a relapse in 2011, calling the underemployed ‘the worst side of Italy’ (*L'Unita'* – Redazione, 2011).

In 2012, a new wave of moral panic surged, with several public figures assigning degrading labels to young people. Elsa Fornero, the minister of welfare, called Italian unemployed youth ‘*schizinosi*’ or ‘choosy’ (*Panorama*, 2012) which, according to the op-ed coverage, ‘opened the gates of hell’ in terms of public debate and the resurfacing of references to *bamboccioni*. Michel Martone, deputy minister of welfare told young Italians via mass media that ‘[i]f you don’t graduate by 28, you are a ‘sfigato’, i.e. a loser’. (*Il Fatto Quotidiano*, 2012) His statement met with reactions from complete support to complete condemnation and everything in between (including support for the content but not the form).

A few months later, Mario Monti, the Italian prime minister, told GQ that ‘young people should forget about permanent contracts’ and it is ‘beautiful to be flexible’, adding that young people ‘have unrealistic expectations of full-time employment’ (*GQ Magazine*, 2012, online). Following a huge public backlash to Monti’s statement, Anna Maria Cancellieri, the minister of interior, rushed to Monti’s defence, saying ‘We Italians are used to permanent jobs next door to mum and dad’ (*Corriere della Sera*, 2012).

In 2013, when Minister of Labour Enrico Giovannini reacted to OECD data showing that Italians having low levels of computer and language skills compared with other

countries globally and consequently have ‘low employability’ (‘poco occupabili’), media coverage of *bamboccioni* flared up again. Even a factual statement such as Giovannini’s stirred the waters, given that the topic was a sensitive one. Thus, the media resurfaced all prior statements by politicians and integrated them into the ensuing national *polemica* (Il Fatto Quotidiano, 2013).

Disproportionality

The media’s inaccurate representation of youth unemployment statistics was discussed earlier; however, I will present a short summary and also include a few expert considerations on the issue of living arrangements, the cornerstone of *bamboccionism*, defined solely by the statistics related to living arrangements.

Myth #1: Youth unemployment in Italy is worse than in the UK, based on youth unemployment rates. As demonstrated through the comparison of unemployment ratios (Fig. 2), the share of officially unemployed youth within the youth cohort, based on the ILO definition (15–24 year olds), is worse in the UK (12%) than in Italy (11%).

Myth #2: Young people are too lazy and/or turn their nose up to menial labour; the market is fine. In the past 15 years, five of twenty 15–24 year olds were employed in Italy versus eleven out of twenty in the UK (ILO, 2016). The Italian market has never been particularly youth-friendly, especially when it comes to educated young people. Thus, comparing countries with different economic structures and different capacities to create employment opportunities for young people does not provide a fair representation for either country if historical data is taken into consideration.

Myth #3: The stay-at-home *bamboccione* is a new phenomenon, and young people just need an incentive to get out of the house. There are a number of studies of Southern European societies showing a higher share of ‘late leavers’, as described by demographers such as Massimo Livi Bacci, who argued that living with parents is a traditional feature of Italian society (Rydell, 2002).

And even though Eurostat data shows that Italy has the second highest number in Europe of 18–34 year olds staying at home, Italian statistics for the 25–34 population (46.6%) are much more in line with other Central and Southern European countries (and places it fourth) based on One Europe (2014) data.

In my creative work, I have used the principle of disproportionality in imagining the Gerontocrats’ propaganda machine. Since a person’s own senses cannot perceive reality all of the time and in all places, increasingly we rely on the steady flow of mass-media

curated information for elements of reality. Thus, in my novel, the Juveniles have no alternative source of information but the steady curated information flow that gets steadily dispensed into their brains via earpieces.

Volatility

The Italian moral panic in the aftermath of the financial crisis ended with two events: first, a new prime minister was appointed who was significantly younger than previous ones, giving the public impression that young people were finally represented in the higher echelons of power; and second, since 2014, the young have emigrated en masse, chiefly to the UK.

These two phenomena have contributed to the volatility of the moral panics around youth unemployment in Italy. The first event has put a youthful face to a gerontocratic political cohort while the second has decreased the pressure on the labour market in Italy.

UK: The Angry Young Man

Methodology

There have been attempts to use moral panics as a framework to explain the London riots of 2011 through mass-media coverage (such as Jefferson, 2015 and Reicher, S. and Stott, C., 2011); however, none of them used Goode and Ben-Yehuda's (1994) five principled framework. Thus, this thesis seeks to add to the conversation.

I used keyword search ('London riots', 'youth unemployment') to identify surges in media interest related to the young unemployed since 2007 and selected five online newspaper articles published during the London riots and five articles published since that warn about potential future riots based on levels of youth unemployment, capitalising on the fear the riots instilled.

I then used discourse analysis to explore moral panic themes within these articles and drew conclusions based on Goode and Ben-Yehuda's (1994) moral panic framework.

Discourse analysis: UK, young, violent, unemployed

We have already established that negative images associated with criminality and deviance have commonly characterized the mass media's portrayal of youth (Bessant,

1995), especially in the UK since the 1960s. When even international organisations such as the ILO use youth unemployment to warn the public about potential future unrest (The Guardian, 2013), when such unrest actually materialises, not only does the public already have a stereotypical image of the perpetrator in mind, but also ‘right-thinking’ people are reassured that it was bound to happen, they saw it coming and something radical must finally be done to restore social order – thus following a typical moral panic escalation pattern. Never was this truer than in the mass media’s portrayal of the young during the London riots of 2011.

During several days in 2011 (6–10 August), the UK witnessed a spate of severe public disturbances, the most significant since 1981, triggered by the murder of a black young man by the police in unclear circumstances. Post factum, the London School of Economics’ study ‘Reading the Riots’ labelled these events ‘arguably the worst bout of civil unrest in a generation’ (Future of London, 2013).

In the days after the riots a ‘cat and mouse game’ (Lewis, 2011) was played between the police and an estimated fifteen thousand people (Peachey, 2014) in various parts of London and other parts of the UK (such as Bristol, Manchester and Birmingham) who engaged in anti-social behaviour chronicled in real time via social media, CCTV-footage and TV coverage.

The riots had ample coverage, during the events and in their aftermath, with the ideological barricades manned by ‘right-thinking’ people trying to make sense of what had happened and co-creating a narrative that gelled into a public accusation of young people as deviants (an in-depth analysis can be found in the *Hostility* section, p. 347).

Concern

This was considered to be the first ‘networked riot’ (Coghlan and Bond, 2011), given the unprecedented communication via social media. Although the riots happened during the ‘silly’ season and with Prime Minister David Cameron on annual holiday, the coverage of the riots and their international echo was extremely large, with print media trying to keep up with the flow of information on tap via social media outlets.

Initially, the trigger event (or the inciting incident, in narrative terms) – the murder of Mark Duggan – raised concern over long-standing tensions between the police and young men of colour in disenfranchised areas of London, among which Tottenham – the origin site of the riots – was known to be faring particularly badly with an

unemployment rate double the national average and the fourth highest level of child poverty in London (Clarke, 2011).

The initial media coverage, based on misleading information from the police (Peachey, 2014), portrayed Mark Duggan as a gangster who had fired first and was killed in an exchange of fire. Hundreds of people gathered in front of the Tottenham police on the afternoon of August 6, mainly friends and family of the deceased, demanding to speak to a senior official about the circumstances of their relative's death. When this request was met with silence, the crowd passed the point of no return, and public unrest began.

Consensus

Consensus-building had three stages. At first it was believed the riots were a reaction to the alleged over-policing of poor, racially conflicted neighbourhoods. The focus was on recent cuts to welfare and high unemployment. Then, when looting began, the message was 'this is criminal, not political', thus silencing any socio-economic-fuelled discontent. Third, when sufficient rationale for the 'full force of the law' was built through mass media, heavy force was deployed with broad public support (The Telegraph, 2011).

Stage 1: Class warfare fuelled by social exclusion

Initially, the riots seemed to be racially and politically motivated, and thus the focus was on social inequality, with headlines such as 'Looting Fuelled by Social Exclusion', (Topping, 2011) dominating public discourse. With 333 deaths in custody since 1998 and no convictions of police officers, the police were not getting any public sympathy. David Cameron's government's 'brutal cuts' to services (e.g. 75% cuts to youth services in Haringey Council) and the worst social mobility among OECD countries, as well as plunging social inequality, were brought to the fore during this stage (Power, 2011).

Politicians stepped forward, highlighting the socio-economic roots of the unrest. Thus, Hackney MP Dianne Abbott and former London mayor Ken Livingstone both stressed that it was apparent participants did not feel they had a stake in society, arguing that the root causes were youth unemployment and a lack of opportunity. Experts were also given a voice to frame the riots via mass media. For example, Clifford Stott at the University of Liverpool saw the riots as 'class warfare on the streets of Britain, [...] targeting the middle class' (Coghlan & Bond, 2011). Criminologist and youth culture

expert professor John Pitts said: ‘They feel they can rationalise it by targeting big corporations. There is a sense that the companies have lots of money, while they have very little’ (Topping, 2011).

Although the first stage did not go without mass media counter-arguments supporting the establishment, there were incontestable statistics showing that, at least geographically, the areas affected were worse off than national averages. At this stage, the pro-establishment argument focused on the failure of the welfare state, which had allegedly created dependency and entitlement among the inhabitants of poor neighbourhoods: ‘Years of Liberal Dogma Have Spawned a Generation of Amoral, Uneducated, Welfare Dependent, Brutalised Youngsters’ (Hastings, 2011).

Stage 2: This is not political; this is criminal

When the looting escalated, previous riots were romanticized for their political aims, drawing a distinction between ‘honourable’ riots and the current dishonourable ones (e.g. turning against one’s community, destroying private property). Here is one example:

In past episodes of rioting, for example during the Brixton race riots of 1981, looting and the destruction of local infrastructure were largely incidental to the broader expression of political anger, by-products of the main show, which was a clash between a community and the forces of the state. But in these new riots, smashing stuff up is all there is. It is childish nihilism (O’Neil, 2011).

Grotesque looting episodes were played ad-nauseam on TV and social media messages were cherry picked for their shock factor: e.g. ‘head to Oxford Circus for pure terror and havoc and free stuff’ (Applebaum, 2011). The riots were labelled ‘shopping riots’ and phrases such as ‘try before you loot’ were coined (Jefferson, 2015).

In the general state of shock, the image of the folk devil began to be consolidated, and the political narrative ‘not political, but criminal’ (The Telegraph, 2011) took off. In ‘A Mob Made by the Welfare State’ O’Neil (2011) wrote: ‘The political context is not the cuts agenda or racist policing – it is the welfare state, which, it is now clear, has nurtured a new generation that has absolutely no sense of community spirit or social solidarity.’

Visual icons confirming the bias presented by the media were given ample space. The image of Waterstones bookshop as the only shop not looted in Clapham spoke more about the rioters' education levels than statistics could (Clark, 2011). Politicians came forward with statements framing the riots as criminal, leaving no space for sympathy for 'the Other'. Prime Minister David Cameron condemned the violence as 'disgraceful criminal behaviour' (Clarke, 2011). He then added, 'What we need to see is the strongest possible police response to restore calm and security to our streets and for communities to work together' (BBC, 2011). A day earlier, on August 8, Theresa May, then home secretary, called the event 'sheer criminality' (BBC, 2011). Later, condemning the riots, David Cameron made sure the non-political motivation of the riots was reinforced: 'These riots were not about government cuts: they were directed at high street stores, not Parliament' (Clarke, 2011). The communities coming together to defend shops, clean up the streets and reprimand rioters on camera were portrayed as heroes, reinforcing the divide between 'Us', right-thinking people, and 'Them', the criminals.

Although there was no official turning point in the fast-paced London Riot timeline, I will hazard to suggest one. The burning of the House of Reeves, a 144-year-old furniture store that 'survived the Depression, two world wars and the deepest recession in a century' and was in the Reeves family for five generations was 'a searing image' (Paton, 2011). But it wasn't the destruction that had the most emotional impact on the public; after all, by then 'London was burning', as one of the most frequent tropes went. It was the 'dramatic image of a woman, Monika Konczyk, hurling herself from a nearby building to escape the fire' and a number of firemen with their arms extended to catch her against the backdrop of the burning store. It became 'the most iconic images of the riots' (Evening Standard, 2012). On its website, the House of Reeves (2011) showed a photograph of the BBC footage showing the furniture shop on fire with the caption underneath: 'Prime Minister to return to London tonight'. Certainly, it was not the burning of the House of Reeves shop alone that convinced the Prime Minister to return from holiday, but it indicated a climax in the timeline of events when the Prime Minister could no longer postpone showing up to lead the country.

This turning point had three key ingredients: historical connotations (privately owned shop, surviving two world wars, business in the family for five generations), archetypal references (Great Fire of London) and drama (woman jumping to safety, but there's no safety net except extended arms). Although there were plenty of well-off looters among perpetrators, the public discourse had moved from trying to understand the causes to

restoring public order. As Malkani (2011) put it: ‘The only certainty was that politicians would credit the perpetrators with whatever agenda most conveniently suited their own ideological programmes – from the left’s concerns about an economic underclass, to the right’s focus on plain and simple criminality.’

Stage 3: And now you shall face the full force of the law

In the Prime Minister’s first speech after his return, he made sure to consolidate a few key ideas:

- **Criminality, not politics:** ‘This is criminality, pure and simple, and it has to be confronted and defeated.’
- **Us versus Them:** ‘People should be in no doubt that we are on the side of the law-abiding people who are appalled by what has happened in their own communities.’
- **No longer live in Fear:** ‘I also feel for all those who live in fear because of these appalling scenes that we’ve seen on the streets of our country.’
- **Full force of the law:** ‘You will feel the full force of the law and if you are old enough to commit these crimes you are old enough to face the punishment’ (The Telegraph, 2011).

In another speech, in Manchester, the Prime Minister spoke of the need for greater police powers, speedy justice and a stronger society in which parents take responsibility for their children (Clarke, 2011). The culmination of the triumph of the state against the folk devils was the identification of a ‘Broken Britain’, 120,000 families across the UK ‘that cause most of the disturbance in communities’ (The Guardian, 2011). The ‘moral’ degradation was finally going to be addressed head-on. The Prime Minister spoke about ‘slow motion moral collapse’ and ‘crime and punishment’ (The Guardian, 2011). The solution was proclaimed: what Britain needed post-riots was a toughening up of the welfare system and more policemen on the beat. Finally, the independent report by the Riots Communities and Victims Panel (Bawdon, 2012) ascribed the cause of the riots to ‘lack of stake in society and a culture of materialism’. Ironically, the use of the word ‘stake’ meant the conversation was framed in commercial terms with citizens as customers.

Hostility

Early on, during the coverage of the London riots, the uneducated, disenfranchised youth were cast as folk devils. But as Bessant (1995, p. 21) pointed out, '[T]hose who wish to claim it is empirically true that unemployed young people are 'at risk' of becoming criminal must first deal with the problems involved in knowing 'the unemployed' and knowing 'the offender''. Gangs were initially thought to be involved because of Mark Duggan's alleged involvement (echoed in the Work and Pensions Secretary Iain Duncan Smith's statement that 'gangs had played a significant part in the riots'), but later it was found that 'they generally did not play a pivotal role, with only 13% of those arrested proven to be gang members' (BBC News, 2011). Racial motives were initially put forward because Mark Duggan was black and because of the over-policing of black neighbourhoods, but later statistics showed a mixed picture: 'In terms of ethnicity, 42% of those charged were white, 46% black, 7% Asian and 5% were classified as 'other'' (BBC News, 2011). Based on more in-depth statistics, the answer seemed to be class, generational and gender divides. Thus, what the figures revealed was that the participants in the riots were 'younger, poorer and of a lower educational achievement than average, and overwhelmingly male', at 90% (BBC News, 2011). Thus, 90% were under 21 years old, 35% were claiming benefits (three times the national average) and nearly half were still in school, with two-thirds having special-education needs. Interviews with rioters revealed that anger against over-policing was a significant motivator, together with a sense of injustice and opportunism (Lewis et al., 2011).

In line with the stages presented previously, the appellatives given to young people started with the stereotypical profile: 'young, male, poor and unemployed' (Taylor, Rogers, & Lewis, 2011), reinforcing the idea of the angry young man portrayed in *The Huffington Post*: 'Young people admitted to being angry and violent because they couldn't see a bright future. Instead, they saw a future with no education, no jobs, and no money' (Paul, 2012).

Reality and fiction blended in Malkani's (2011)'s 'Britain Burns the Colour of *A Clockwork Orange*'. As the riots flared, participants in the riot were repeatedly labelled 'feral', 'yobs', 'thugs', 'mindless', 'welfare-state mobs suckled by the state', 'disaffected youth' (Wall, 2011).

The rioters were increasingly de-humanised and lumped together:

[A] large, amoral, brutalised sub-culture of young British people, [...who are] essentially wild beasts. [...] They respond only to instinctive animal impulses – to eat and drink, have sex, seize or destroy the accessible property of others. [...] My dogs are better behaved and subscribe to a higher code of values than the young rioters of Tottenham, Hackney, Clapham and Birmingham (Hastings, *The Daily Mail*, 2011, online).

Finally, they were thought to be ‘products of a culture that gives them so much unconditionally that they are let off learning how to become human beings’ (Hastings, 2011).

The media gave a prominent voice to moral entrepreneurs, as defined in the moral panics framework, such as Anthony Daniels, a retired prison doctor and psychiatrist. He was quoted by the *Daily Mail* saying that ‘the British were now in great fear of their own arrogant, knife-wielding children’. He also argued that ‘Britain's young had a sense of entitlement [and] the poor had no other choice but to wheedle, cajole, swindle and steal it’ (Moral and Hall, *The Daily Mail*, 2011, online). As revealed in previous research, comparisons with animals were used to illustrate the feral nature of young people. Thus, animal instincts were referred to as authors tried to explain why rioters destroyed their own communities: ‘We have a saying in Britain for people who undermine their own living quarters [mollycoddled mob, a riotous expression of carelessness for one’s own community] – we call it shitting on your own doorstep’ (O’Neil, 2011). Predictably, referrals to biological inferiority were also called upon: ‘Do rioters [pictured looting a shop in Hackney] have lower levels of a brain chemical that helps keep behaviour under control? Scientists think so’ (Hastings, 2011). The shift in public discourse towards de-humanising young people was perceptively caught by Alex Wheatle, MBE, an award-winning writer of British Jamaican heritage who had been part of the 1981 riots. ‘The initial protest and vigil in Tottenham was a just one. [...] From demanding the police to be accountable for their actions the talk is now of feral youth’ (Beckles, 2011).

Moral entrepreneurs

In light of this dichotomy – animal versus human – the moral entrepreneurs had clearly

delineated their position: ‘Only [...] politicians, judges, policemen and teachers with the courage to force feral humans to obey rules the rest of us have accepted all our lives – can provide a way forward and a way out for these people’ (Hastings, 2011). In the post riot clean up, ‘right thinking’ community members donned signs of their righteousness: ‘Clean up campaigns involve[ed] 2–300 people each time, some with “Looters are scum” vests’ (Jefferson, 2015, pp. 5-22).

Disproportionality

Disproportionality was at the root cause of the resentment against policemen that fuelled the London riots (Strickland, 2014). For example, in 2010 the Equality and Human Rights Commission published a report on the use of the Police and Criminal Evidence Act 1984, section 1, which accounts for more than a million stops annually, with black people stopped and searched seven times more than white people. In response to the riots, the government decided to use heavily armoured Jankel vehicles to clear the streets, increased the police force from 6,000 to 16,000 persons (‘the biggest police deployment in UK history’) and authorised the use of plastic bullets, bringing the riots to an end (Jefferson, 2015). Also, ‘450 detectives were assigned to hunt for rioters in the aftermath.’

Post-riot, the excessive sentencing levels bordered on vindictiveness. In his analysis of the London riots through the lens of moral panic, Jefferson (2015) noted that the ‘post-riot exemplary sentences’ had symbolic purpose and labelled them ‘sheer vindictiveness of the state’s post-riot response – hunting down the rioters, harsh sentencing, naming juveniles’. Specifically, Jefferson’s (2015, p. 15) analysis showed that, based on 1,300 riot-related cases that appeared before courts, ‘70% of cases were remanded in custody, versus 10% rate for serious offences; of those sentenced, 70% were imprisoned, against a norm of 2%, with sentences up to 40% longer than usual’.

Volatility

The riots ended with the introduction of tough policing, which by that point in the riots was welcome without public protest. A number of investigations were launched and reports were published; high profile cases received coverage in mainstream media even a year later (e.g. the arsonist who started the Reeves fire received an eleven-year prison sentence).

However, even if youth unemployment numbers have almost halved since their one-million peak in 2009–2013, it doesn't mean that suddenly the 'feral' youth have all been tamed into middle-class morality. Five years on, the question 'how long before it all kicks off again?' is still being asked, even if it seems unlikely that similar riots would happen again (Philips, 2016).

The Rhetorical Circle

Moral panics, engineered by moral entrepreneurs, rely heavily on language and metaphors, on collective images that we can all relate to.

In the case of youth unemployment, this is true even more since, as previously demonstrated, the data are sliced and diced in so many directions (e.g. different definitions and measures including various age ranges, lengths of time and cultural factors) that it is impossible to bring ultimate, comprehensive evidence reflecting the full spectrum of an individual's situation and position in the market and also accounting for subjective aspects such as inner drive, motivation and desire to explore one's potential.

Meanwhile, powerful cultural images are being constructed through the use of language. Urbanski (1975, p. 5) coined the term 'rhetorical circle' to refer to the way our deep-seated fears, reflected in speculative fiction, 'work their way [...] into our broader popular culture, our language and ultimately our rhetoric'. This circle closes 'when the images created by the genre to reflect our nightmares work their way back through public consciousness into our discourse' (p. 6). I argue below that this rhetorical circle is not happenstance but is engineered during moral panics.

Thus before reaching the stage of expression through language, images are deployed to carry the symbolic theme of the message. There were two distinct but eerily consistently images that governed the moral panics in both Italy and the UK. In the UK, the archetypal visual was The Great Fire of London while in Italy it was the poster of the French film *Tanguy* (2001).

UK: The Great Fire of London lives on

In 1666, a powerful, five-day fire swept through the City of London damaging almost all the properties inside the Roman city wall. Two common archetypal

images encountered in today's Britain are Christopher's Wren's The Monument and the nursery rhyme 'London's Burning'. This cultural archetype was frequently used during the riots, as well. Thus, the title 'London's Burning' was a common headline, as were references to this cultural trope in various articles (The Times, 2011; The Australian, 2011; The New Yorker, 2011; O'Neil, 2011).

In addition to cultural tropes, visual cues were powerfully used by the media during the London riots. The most frequently used visual accompanying newspaper articles was the image of a man in sweatpants and hoodie with a balaclava covering his face, set against a car or a building on fire. Other visual media also contributed to the collective imagination: thus, Channel 4 produced a four-part drama about the London riots entitled 'London's Burning' (Channel 4, 2011). As noted by Clarke (2011), 'Images of burning buildings [...] provided news broadcasters with a stream of disturbing images over the summer. The footage of the Reeves furniture store on fire in Croydon being razed to the ground will remain a defining image of the August riots'.

Two years afterward, a conference about the London riots that had Right Honourable David Lammy, MP for Tottenham and author of *Out of the Ashes: Britain after the Riots*, as keynote speaker was entitled 'After the Flames and the Fury: 2 Years on from the Riots' (Future of London, 2013).

In the subsequent elaboration of the riots, 'anger' become a common trope: 'Racist Police Caused the Justified Anger of the Riots, Says Jeremy Corbyn's New Equalities MP' (Doyle, 2016); 'I Was One of the London Rioters. In 2011 We Didn't Know How to Express Our Anger' (Phillips, 2015).

In speculative fiction, the ultimate angry young man character is Alex from *A Clockwork Orange*. The publication of Burgess' book and the launch of Kubrick's movie were both met with bouts of moral panic of their own. In a cultural analysis of the *Clockwork* controversy, Brugge (2010) argued on a website dedicated to Kubrick's art that *A Clockwork Orange* had become 'a euphemism in the press, a stereotype for referring to teenage crime and societal deviance'.

In keeping with Urbanski's rhetorical circle, nearly half a century later the trope made its rhetorical comeback in the public discourse. Thus, Malkani, the author of the novel *Londonstani* wrote an article in the *Financial Times* (2011) entitled 'Britain Burns the Colour of *A Clockwork Orange*' while the *New York Post* (Smith, 2011) referred to London public unrest as 'The Clockwork Riots'.

Malkani argued that, 'with its depiction of a lawless Britain, where the police command

neither confidence nor deference and residents live in fear of feral youth empowered by their own vernacular, the parallels in Burgess's novel are instructive' (Malkani, *The Financial Times*, 2011, online). He also showed that Burgess' protagonist's lack of political motivation is not couched as nihilism but as a way to feel alive. In the same way, the self-destruction of the rioters, many 'laughing as they looted', is considered 'more dystopian than nihilism', and their 'apathetic rampage, although apparently without a meaningful target, or not politically motivated', did not mean that 'it wasn't directed at anything'.

Two years after the riots, as writer Polly Courtney was interviewing many of the 2011 rioters for her novel, the *Daily Star* (2013) released an interview with her with the inflammatory title: 'Youth Employment Crisis Could Spark Riots. VIOLENT Riots Are About to Batter Britain for the Second Time in Two Years, It Was Claimed Last Night'. In the interview, she stated that 'jobless youngsters are so desperate that it is only a matter of time before they hit the streets in another wave of fighting, arson and looting'. She also alleged that teenagers 'with nothing to lose' could wreak even more havoc than during the riots of 2011. And round and round goes the cautionary tale.

Italy: *Tanguy* or inter-generational blackmail

In the case of Italy, the leading photograph used by many newspapers (online at least) was of a French movie still. A large number of articles on the topic of young people over the past eight years, regardless of whether the content is positive or negative, have used the poster from the movie *Tanguy*, providing a stereotypical image of the *bamboccione*: a particularly nasty 28-year-old who blackmailed his parents into maintaining him. Italy is facing a huge demographic decline due to low birth rates, a fast aging population and low immigration. Low birth rates mean that many elderly couples only have one child. The image of Tanguy, the single child of well-off parents who decided to live as a parasite off their moral duty to support him, is probably a recurring nightmare on a personal level. At the collective level, Italy's demographic pyramid becomes even more of a nightmare scenario when we consider the growing elderly population who enjoyed stable jobs and large salaries, and thus are expecting to enjoy significant state pensions as they retire. However, with a base comprising young people who are struggling to enter the market, hanging on for dear life in precarious

jobs with poor salaries or living off family assets, the future is not bright for the older generation.

The plot of Bosonetto's *Requiem for a Prolonged Adolescence*, written in 2008, centres on a law that forces young people leave the family home (thus anticipating Brunetta's law to force all 18 year olds to leave the family home). The protagonist, an only child in his 30s, resorts – like Tanguy – to a blackmail strategy to get his parents to continue to support him. Brunetta's statement was in reaction to the court case forcing a father to maintain his 32-year old daughter who was still in university after eight years, mentioned above. Even if it is culturally acceptable in Italy to live with and be maintained by one's parents into adulthood, the idea of a young person using the legal system to maintain these rights against right-minded folk approaching retirement produced a strong public reaction. Unlike the British folk devils who were de-humanised by the use of animal-related metaphors, the words used against the Italian folk devils are de-humanising on an intellectual level, aimed at degrading the capacity of young people to exercise will-power:

- ***Bamboccione*** implies someone who is protected from reality, weak and sheltered from hardship; it also implies someone who should have outgrown such privilege (that children may have for instance). An English phrase that has been used for *bamboccione* is 'lazy slob', which also has a moral implication related to 'laziness'. Although not directly implied in the word *bamboccione*, the cultural implication does indeed suggest it. As a matter of fact, Brunetta admitted in an article published in *L'Unita* (2011) that, until he left his parents' house, his mother used to make his bed.
- ***Schizinosi***: This is typically used in connection with one's taste in food, meaning someone who is difficult to please. It doesn't include the positive implication of healthy selectiveness or someone with a high standard, but more someone who always turns their nose up regardless of the situation and is simply living a life of perennial discontent.
- ***Sfigato***: This word literally translates as a 'loser'. A softer meaning would be 'unlucky'; however, it is believed the first meaning was intended by the Italian politician Michel Martone (Il Fatto Quotidiano, 2012).
- ***La parte peggiore dell'Italia***: 'The worst side of Italy' is the literal translation. This is an all-encompassing, broad-brush statement implying that all those who are underemployed (and have no say in the type of contracts that they are

given) are actually to blame for their own situation and, in effect, constitute a negative category deprived of redeeming features.

The outrageousness of this language, although retracted or modified post-event by the high-level politicians who used it, created waves of reaction. There are a few critical elements to note about the way Italian politicians used language to put down young Italians. First, these politicians were never seriously reprimanded by their parties and fellow government members. They were not forced to step down or to publicly apologise. At a maximum, they were given a wrist-slap. Thus, the carnival of derogatory discussion of young people's intellectual capabilities or drive continues. Second, young people reacted strongly to the label, and thus the *polemica* ended up being about the meta-issue, that is the label '*bamboccione*' rather than the issues themselves: unemployment, precariousness, etc. Italian interviewees (see Appendix 2) reacted strongly to the discourse regarding the *bamboccione* label even years after the media frenzy had died down.

In conclusion, name-calling seems to have been an effective distraction tactic to keep young people trapped in a cycle of helplessness, given that, as the names they are called imply, they can't do anything about those using those names, regardless whether those persons are right or not.

FINDINGS: LITERARY ANALYSIS

Heather Urbanski explored the cultural role of speculative fiction and supported Gordon van Gelder's opinion that 'the cautionary tale is the embodiment of our dreams and nightmares about the future'. She also argued, in the same analysis, that 'what writers of speculative fiction do is to look at society, into the future, and within themselves, and then reflect the fears and nightmares they find' (Urbanski 1975, p.9). I would add that looking at the past is equally important. In fact, (Acerbi, 2013) reviewed fiction published between 1960 and 2000 and found that the emotion that exhibited the greatest increase over these four decades, across all genres, was fear.

The dominant emotion: Fear

In both Italy and the UK, young people caught in the previously defined 'yo-yo transitions' to adulthood experience stereotyping and typecasting as folk devils because of society's underlying fears: the fear of the angry young man in the UK and the fear of the aboulitic, de-motivated young person in Italy. Speculative fiction has mined these fears in creative ways and held them back to readers as mirrors to shock them, shake them and perhaps interrogate their bigotry. Urbanski, (drawing on Amis, 1960) painted the picture of this two-sided mirror, which is 'strongly activist in its attitudes' and, at times, 'functions as an instrument of social diagnosis and warning' (Urbanski, 1975, pp. 8-9).

I shall explore below the expression of these underlying fears in two novels of speculative fiction, *A Clockwork Orange* by Anthony Burgess and *A Requiem for a Prolonged Adolescence* by Marco Bosonetto, to show how the writers have expressed the prevalent fears in their respective cultures at the times when these books were written.

Though these novels were written in different time periods and geographical spaces—*A Clockwork Orange* was written in 1962 in Britain, while *Requiem for a Prolonged Adolescence* was written in 2008 in Italy—they are united by the way in which they portray the fears of their times and cultural contexts through speculative fiction. Their protagonists are young men with polar opposite levels of agency, fuelled by different emotions: Alex, the protagonist of *A Clockwork Orange*, is defined by anger and acting out. Still a teenager, Alex is bent on (self)destruction. By age 15, he is a veteran of the juvenile justice system and has accomplished 'the lot': destruction, plunder, rape and

murder. Candido, the protagonist of *Requiem*, embodies the stereotype of the *bamboccione*: he is overeducated, laid back and rather condescending about the world around him. He is 32 years old, has been unemployed for six years and lives in his parents' pockets, relying on them for food, shelter and pocket money. He lives in a chronic aboulie state.

In both works of speculative fiction, the generational divide is the fundamental fault line that feeds the protagonists' core emotions. Both protagonists fundamentally resent the power figures in their respective societies: parents, authority figures and anyone with power over them and their lives. Eventually, in both cases, the State, as the locus of power, is both judge and jury in deciding to 'fix' the young men and endow them with behaviours that are socially acceptable. This common resolution echoes Cohen's 'moral barricades manned by right-thinking people', who mount moral panics in order to restore social order and fold the folk-devils back into the common social fabric.

Angry Young Man: A Clockwork Orange

A Clockwork Orange was written during Britain's social and sexual revolution of the 1960s, a decade that saw abundance for the first time after the war. The parents of teenagers during this time had fought in the war. They wanted their children to enjoy their youth, and so provided for them in a way that was unprecedented in previous generations. At the time, there was negligible unemployment, the consumer society was on the rise and violence and crime were on the increase.

This period marked the rise of the youth sub-cultures, such as the Teds, the Rockers and the Mods, which, according to (Volkmann, 2003) were 'violent, wild, anti-authority and sexist' (Widdicombe & Wooffitt 1995, p.9 cite Volkmann 2003). Sinfield (1983, p. 27, cited in Mikulakova 2009, p.24) linked the rebelliousness of young men in the 1960s with the lack of causes for which to fight; in this way, these young people differed from those of previous generations, who had fought in the world wars. As Alex puts it, 'I couldn't help a bit of disappointment at things as they were those days. Nothing to fight against, really. Everything as easy as kiss-my-sharries'. Indeed, as illustrated in the moral panic literature on the social deviance of youth, in the 1960s, young people in Britain who had disposable income were considered dangerous by the right-thinking folk. The good, solid morals of the past demanded frugality and deprivation. Alex, who is employed, worked by day and looted by night and never needed pocket money from

his parents, fit the widespread fears among parents at the time about the things that could go wrong if young people had access to easy income.

In 2011, when the rate of people on benefits among the rioters reached three times the national average, it appeared that an atavist fear had finally been tapped. The welfare state, with its seemingly endless flow of money, was accused of turning young people to crime. However, this public perception is not supported by scientific research. From an evolutionary psychology perspective, Recalibrational Theory explains that anger is activated by cues that another individual places insufficient weight on the angry person's welfare when making decisions, i.e. they devalue that individual's interests highly (Sell, 2011). Thus, in a society where discrimination and inequality are the norm, the ground is fertile for anger to grow. It is not the welfare state that turns young people 'feral' but class divisions and inequalities that are more likely to contribute to that. What makes Alex's figure so powerful and his anger-fuelled violence so disturbing is that his actions have no obvious planning or motivation. His violent sprees seem 'opportunistic': a word that was repeated throughout the London riots to describe the rationales for the looting.

Burgess uses two words from his invented language of Nadsat to illustrate anger: 'razdrax' and 'bezoomny'. Alex rarely displays anger during the perpetration of his crimes, for which there appear to be no reasons. However, he does grow incredibly angry in two circumstances that seem trivial in comparison with the 'ultra-violence' that leaves him cold. The first instance is when his friend, Dim, disrespects the one thing that he loves in life: classical music. In this instance, Alex rages that Dim is a 'Filthy drooling mannerless bastard; [...] I get all bezoomny when any veck interferes with a ptitsa singing'. The second circumstance occurs when Alex feels betrayed. This happens several times throughout the book. There is one instance in which his leadership is challenged by his droogs: 'I could feel myself getting all razdrax inside, but I tried to cover it'. Another instance occurs when his cell mates make him a scapegoat for murder: 'I began to get razadraz about this. [...] Traitors. Traitors and liars'. Lastly, when he returns home after his release, he is confronted with the ultimate betrayal. His parents have taken in a tenant to live in his room, an usurper in his parents' space and hearts: 'I could nearly have smecked loud at that if the old razdrax within me hadn't started to wake up the feeling of wanting to sick [...]'. Thus, judging by the emotions depicted by Burgess and the insights provided by Recalibrational Theory, it is possible that Alex's anger is fuelled by feelings of being disrespected and/or betrayed by adults. According to the Recalibrational Theory of anger, if Alex and his droogs believe *a*

priori that the older generation does not respect them, then everyone in their ‘forties–fifties or some old age like that’ will become a target of age-based gang-fare.

Burgess makes use of an experimental therapy, called the Reclamation Treatment, a violent intrusive therapy, to illustrate how the State tries to exorcise the ‘ultra-violence’ out of Alex. The Treatment allows the State to supersede Alex’s emotions and consequently his feelings of anger are automatically correlated with a desire to be sick. In the final chapter, Alex’s anger seems to have come full circle and deflated into apathy: ‘I didn’t like care much. It was like something soft getting into me and I could not pony why’. While he was away, the world had moved on.

Alex’s transformation is a rite of passage, a transition into adulthood, as if he is saying farewell to youth. Through this change, he demonstratively makes the conscious decision to cross into the realm of adulthood, and for it, he must give up his ‘ultra-violent’ past. For him to become an adult, he can no longer be angry.

A Clockwork Orange is a cultural icon and is a perfect example of Urbanski’s rhetorical circle. The powerful image of Alex’s ‘ultra-violence’, opportunism and ‘feral’ quality emerged from the depths of our shared cultural heritage to depict the London riots.

Thus, in ‘Britain burns the colour of *A Clockwork Orange*’, Malkani used two cultural metaphors already discussed: the Great Fire of London and Anthony Burgess’ novel (Malkani, 2011, *The Financial Times*, online). Thus, Urbanski’s rhetorical circle, as she envisaged it, is complete.

Puer Aeternus: Requiem

The broader historical context of Bosonetto’s book relates to the beginning of the global financial crisis. In May 2007, Giuliano Amato, the Italian Minister of Interior, called for the establishment of an Inter-Generational Contract between the young and the old generations in Italy. The Contract was meant to spare young people from having to play an ‘absurd retirement roulette’ (Giannini, *La Repubblica*, 2007, online).

At the time, the youth unemployment rate was 19.4% (according to ILO historical statistics), half the current rate, so there was no particular pressure in terms of public statistics (though, as we have seen, reality is a bit different). Instead, the actual pressure came from the old generation, which had been increasing. The elderly seeking to draw their pensions were facing emptier and emptier Treasury coffers, which the young were failing to fill.

Given this background, when Tommaso Padoa-Schioppa made his comment in October 2007 labelling young Italians still living with their parents ‘bamboccioni’, or ‘big babies’ in English, it was the spark that lit the flame of the inter-generational relationship (Vogt, 2012). As demonstrated earlier, the public rhetoric escalated and was focused on young people’s lack of initiative, their desire to be sheltered by their families and their implied laziness.

Drawing inspiration from this historical and cultural context, Bosonetto set the action in *Requiem for a Prolonged Adolescence* in 2013 (at the time, five years into the future). The Italian Parliament in the novel’s fictional universe has just passed a bill entitled ‘Campaign to Eradicate Prolonged Adolescence’ (CEPA), which empowers parents to throw bamboccioni out of their house (with the help of the police, if necessary).

Urbanski’s rhetorical circle was closed two years later, when Brunetta made his infamous statement about the need for a law that would oblige young people to leave their parental homes when they reached 18 years old. It is very unlikely that Brunetta had read Bosonetto’s book, since this novel had not reached the same cult status as *A Clockwork Orange* had in Britain. However, Urbanski’s rhetorical circle is proven once more: speculative fiction draws upon the fears prevalent in societies and re-elaborates them in narrative form.

Bosonetto’s protagonist is a *bamboccione*, part of ‘a generation who would like to be emancipated without plying to the tyranny of full employment while waiting comfortably for the future to arrive, seated in the family living room’. He lives next door to his parents and spends his time reading, doing menial jobs related to his degree in Russian literature and hanging out with his friends. Bosonetto endows him with the full spectrum of stereotypes surrounding the *bamboccione* trope. Fundamentally, he identifies Candido’s core essence as a lack of agency.

In psychology, a lack of agency, or aboulia, is a neuro-behavioural condition that refers to ‘a motivational deficit that is associated with apathy, loss of will, and lack of initiating behaviours’ and thus ‘patients just feel like not doing anything’ (Stemmer & Whitaker 2008, p.204).

When Candido is thrown out of the house by his parents, he is jolted out of his aboulia state. He gets angry with his parents and the police enforcers, Rebori and Ardenti, firm in the beliefs that his rights are being infringed upon, that he is not a *bamboccione* and that his lifestyle needs no changing. Candido’s behaviour is permeated by a sense of entitlement, but his motivation is based on a reaction to external forces, rather than personal drive. He is convinced that behind the CEPA must be ‘the lobby of the real

estate rent market, the construction lobby in need of cheap labour or the lobby of psychotherapists'. He is busy finding scapegoats for his situation. Employment is certainly not one of his top priorities.

As mentioned earlier, Bossonetto's book did not do particularly well commercially in Italy, despite holding a mirror to Italian society as far as the *bamboccione* phenomenon was concerned. One reason may be that the protagonist is too realistic, in the sense that he lacks agency, just like a stereotypical *bamboccione* would. Since a protagonist without agency cannot carry the story forward, *Requiem* struggles to be memorable. Despite this, however, the book is important as a text that illustrates how speculative fiction feeds on a society's fears. There is no doubt that the rhetoric that accuses young people of being essentially aboulic is rooted in inter-generational anxiety. With one in five people over 65 years old (the fourth-oldest population in the world), Italy's gerontocracy is experiencing a ticking bomb scenario. (ILO Population Statistics, 2016) Without stable, well-paying jobs, young people are out of the 'retirement roulette'. What the young do or do not do is becoming urgent for those who have had stable, well-paying jobs over long careers and who are now at the threshold of retirement, expecting to collect pensions. Thus, the sudden interest in young people is not concerned with protecting their rights; rather, it seeks to urge them to pull themselves out of their state of a lack of agency.

However, just as with Bosonetto's character, it is not sufficient to tell people to 'snap out of it' or to kick them out on the streets. If by calling young people names, the Gerontocrats are trying to teach young people self-esteem, it is certainly not working. Neither is being proud of those to choose to emigrate in order to better themselves. Either way, in an attempt to 'fix' young people, the older generation is smothering them.

Through the State-enforced CEPA, the protagonist's freedom of choice is superseded by the State. In the final chapter, Candido manages to earn some money by putting to use his (until then) useless degree in Russian literature and his love of the Master and Margarita. However, the ending feels forced, the reward cheap and Candido's newly acquired sense of self-worth fabricated. Fundamentally, the ending does not seem genuine. It almost feels like another piece of State propaganda has infiltrated the novel: just follow your passion and everything will be fine, eventually, if you get rid of your parental nest props.

However, perhaps this is only another way to see Urbanski's rhetorical circle at work. The writer's imagination is so consumed with cultural tropes that writing from inside

the culture narrows his imagination to propaganda. After all, Burgess travelled to Russia before he wrote *A Clockwork Orange*. Sometimes, leaving your culture allows you to understand it better and close the (rhetorical) circle.

CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS

Cui Prodest? Reflections on Generational Apartheid

The authorities on moral panics, Erich Goode and Nachman Ben-Yehuda (1994) prompt us to ask the following question: *Cui prodest?* Who benefits from singling out youth as the problem in society? This question is in line with the political-economy perspective, which requires an examination of what or who causes economic trends and who benefits or suffers from those trends.

In a critical piece published in *La Repubblica* in Italy, and entitled ‘The False Legend of the Bamboccioni,’ the political scientist Ilvo Diamanti remarked that the blame for the economic situation and the ‘black hole future’ of young people in Italy lies squarely with previous generations, i.e., ‘those that attack them from the height of their ministerial positions’ (Diamanti, 2012). Although this is a commonly held view, also reflected in interviews with young Italians, this is not openly debated, mainly because the financial and social inter-dependencies between generations are strong.

Italian researchers demonstrate that Italy is a gerontocracy: thus, four out of every five people in power are over 50 years old, while only 3% are under 35 (of which 71% are sportspeople), with women virtually excluded from higher decision-making circles (Il Libero Quotidiano, 2012). The UK, on the other hand, has been labelled by the media as a ‘chumocracy’ given the spate of appointments in the Cameron government from a small circle of friends with common educational background at Eton and Oxford, (Bryant, 2013). The numbers in Italy are so shocking that this age-based inequality is now difficult to challenge; it has simply swayed too far in one direction. The UK is not so severely split along generational lines as Italy, but it has a more noticeable split along social class lines. This came to the fore starkly during the London riots, when issues of poverty and inequality were salient and spotlighted in news coverage.

The current stereotyping of young people through public discourse as either angry or aboulitic stems from a need to justify the generational divide (in Italy: Ciccarelli, 2014) or the socio-economic divide (in the UK: Office of National Statistics, 2013). There is an almost righteous need to give the divide a veneer of morality, and thus efforts to engineer moral panics appear to be experiments in how groups come together to reinforce the self-righteousness of their class (whether age-based or socio-economic). Parents are crucial in the choices that young people make about their future both in the United Kingdom and in Italy, as evidenced in the analysis of interviews in Appendix 2.

Whether they oppose, encourage or are neutral about their children's choices, they are key stakeholders in shaping their futures. Young people make educational choices very early, at an impressionable age, based mostly on emotional arguments rather than facts or in-depth knowledge about the labour market or even about their own talents and potential. The rhetoric of a return on investment in education has permeated the rationalisation of career choices. You will—or you won't—find work seems to be a key driver of career advice. Mostly, this type of advice is based on historical trends, which may not be the best predictors of future demand in the labour market.

Despite the lottery of educational choice, the overwhelming insight from a review of the literature is that the societal expectation is that young people should get things right the first time around, with an implied linearity of a school-to-work transition. Moreover, statistics on school-to-work transition are geared to measure a point in time when young people are generally figuring things out, trying, testing and failing, and feeling their way into the first career of their lifetime. As acknowledged elsewhere, research into moral panics, as well as into school-to-work transitions, rely heavily on one side of the story only (as told by the employers) or on quantitative ways of knowing (statistics) rather than on human stories. Consequently, young people come up short of adults' expectations of them.

As the ethnographic interviews carried out in the frame of this research show, young people spend a lot longer in transition, and they experience a start-stop entry into the labour market. They also do not necessarily compete in a 'youth-only' market, with many switching careers because of necessity or re-(discovered) passion. Thus they end up competing with other generations. Although all have to start from scratch, the previous experience of the older generation gives them an edge when competing with the younger generation.

The extracts from interviews outlined extensively in Appendix 2, show the diversity of experience and the countless variables that have influenced young people's choices and transitions. They show how, in many cases, they blindly navigate their paths while continually being bombarded by messages from people in authority, often via engineered moral panics rather than by honest and transparent conversations about youth transitions.

Typcasting young people as 'angry' or as 'lazy slobs' is only possible because there is no such thing as an objectively identifiable and immutable 'youth' category, which can be mobilised to speak against the stereotypes.

First, the various youth thresholds identified earlier are nowadays experienced by a wide age category, in some cases extending from 15 to 45 years. In some cultures, this arch-generation that finds itself betwixt and between can potentially include three generations. The problem of self-identification as one generation or as one category with similar issues becomes evident. None of the respondents, even when belonging to the same age group, identified with the category of young unemployed; every single one perceived their situation to be unique and assumed individual responsibility for the future.

Second, age, (unlike gender and race), is not a stable feature; rather, these are cultural constructs. The diversity of the young people's age cohort is another barrier to feeling part of the same oppressed category. Once young people have passed a certain age threshold, or have changed their types of contract, for instance, they will cease to identify with the problems of the broader youth category.

Third, even if one could neatly define the youth tribe and were able to inspire a sense of belonging to it based on a broader set of values such as human rights, the decline in trade union movements, which were the backbone of the fight for labour rights in the 1960s and 70s, precludes the young from acceding to a potential advocacy platform. Moreover, in some cases (and especially in Italy), trade unions are essentially segregated by age, and they aim to maintain the special contractual welfare benefits of the older generations at the expense of the young as new entrants into the labour market.

The Split Labour Market

This generational divide was aptly portrayed by the labour law expert and Italian parliamentary member Pietro Ichino (Ciccarelli, 2014). He noted that the Italian labour market, with its discriminating typology of contracts, is split by age categories and 'condemns the labourers to a generational apartheid.'

The split labour market theory was coined by sociologist Phillip Bonacich (1972) to explain labour market segmentation by race and ethnicity, and he argued that when it is more advantageous for an employer to hire workers from one category rather than from another, a split labour market emerges. Thus, it is not individual prejudice that leads to racial tensions but imbalances in the socio-economic structure.

Research into split labour markets has traditionally had an ethnic focus (Banerjee and Knight, 1985; Bonacich, 1976) rather than one of age. However, this narrow focus creates a blind spot in terms of our understanding of youth unemployment because it is

very possible, as Ichino points out (Ciccarelli, 2014), that young people are pushed into a split labour market in which they are in many cases directly pitted against immigrants who would typically compete for entry-level, lower-paid jobs. In public discourse, moral panics related to immigration often refer, in some form and at some stage, to high youth unemployment levels. Blaming a lack of local employment opportunities on immigrants essentially disguises the in-country generational divide in terms of its labour practices.

Thus, as McDermott (1985) points out, the social construction of the crisis of unemployment, and explicitly youth unemployment, gives the state an opportunity to directly intervene in the labour market and to restructure it (p.91). Hence, whenever the State needs to intervene and balance the labour market, it has two convenient scapegoats (or levers that it can push and pull): migrants and youth. In the UK, the rhetoric about migrants' stealing jobs is more salient, while in Italy it is the youth agency rhetoric that prevails, although migrants are also scapegoated, despite the fact that they are overwhelmingly undertaking low-paying, high-intensity jobs.

It is clear that the age and socio-economic fault lines in the respective labour markets (with the complicating variable of migration flows) did not appear overnight. However, it was possible for the split in the labour market to deepen while the public discourse was focused on the hope that mass higher education was going to deliver on its promise. The extension of time spent in formal education was labelled 'sequestration in schools' by Rowntree and Rowntree (Rowntree & Rowntree, 1968), a theme recurring in Bowles and Gintis (2002), and which arguably contributed to young people's marginalisation. These scholars argued that the media played a key role in enabling the interests of Capitalism to prevail over those of youth. However, since these arguments were first introduced, globalisation has added yet another layer of complexity. Thus, the argument of Brown and Lauder (2006) that we are currently witnessing a global auction for jobs is all the more relevant.

The argument that split labour markets are 'resolved by the conflicting groups through the mobilisation of symbolic resources in moral panics' was made successfully by Auerhahn (1999, p.413). However, in the context of a globalised labour market, the problem is that moral panics are still stirred up at a national level and solutions are sought locally when the interconnectedness of the global labour market requires a globally competitive view and a global awareness of complex social issues, such as youth unemployment.

Divide et Impera

Despite the implications of having to compete in a global labour market, both Italy and the UK have adopted a divide et impera (divide and conquer) rhetoric when it comes to their public discourse.

- Thus, youth unemployment is statistically sliced in such a way that it conceals the many shades where there is a lack of dignified labour (due to underemployment, overeducation).
- Migrants are blamed for ‘taking jobs’ from locals. Often, migrants are also blamed for undercutting the wages paid locally to young people.
- The very definition of youth precludes discussions leading to a proper understanding of labour transitions, start-stop careers, first, second and third careers and so on.

These research insights have filtered into my creative writing in concepts such as the Good Wall against the barbarians (a concept that at the time of writing my thesis was not yet foreseen as possible policy, the slave market for foreigners (split labour market) and the utilitarian discourse regarding the Juveniles: i.e the mandatory assignment of roles, such as Breeders or Bodies.

The arch-generation of youthful persons constantly in transition in the labour market, knocking at the various thresholds of adulthood, have one thing in common: they are ‘not messed up’, as Carol Hanisch famously noted in her essay ‘The Personal is Political’ (Hanisch, 1969; 2006 author’s web-site) (i.e., they are no angrier or more violent than other generations in the past, and they are no more prone to developing the Peter Pan syndrome than prior generations). Rather, in Hanisch’s terminology, they are ‘messed over,’ which implies that stereotypes serve only one purpose: to avoid discussion about the whole (the crisis of labour in developed countries in a globalised society) by focusing on the parts (i.e., on violence and unemployment at a national level), while ensuring that benefit accrues to the elite (the generational or political elite, in the respective countries).

Bessant (1995) eloquently argued that the ‘politics of contests over meaning’ (p.35) achieve a double aim: to define the problem and thus the solution. Consequently, instead of addressing the crisis of labour, public discourse has been framed in such a way that it puts the crisis of youth labour at the centre. However, by using old frameworks, such as the assumption that full adult male employment is still a reachable ideal, it may be hampering the identification of new solutions.

But while moral panics come and go, stereotypes remain: ‘the lost generation,’ ‘the undeserving young,’ ‘the wrong degree,’ ‘the wrong attitude’ have become common tropes. The fragmentation of the youth class is more and more common and leads to a privatisation of discontent, as shown earlier by Burris (1983). In turn, the privatisation of discontent leads to identity wars in an attempt to restore internal world order or to fit into a typology that society demands of the individual. In this fast-changing world, we may no longer witness mass youth revolutions, but individual ones, quiet wars waged within families and communities against the burden of expectation of a return to the perfect labour market of the past.

My novel is an example of an individual revolution, an attempt to tell one story that speaks of injustice. Alida, the protagonist, is struggling to fight not only the injustice against her generation but also the burden of patriarchal and filial expectations. Before she can come into her own as a protagonist, she must fight the expectations that a good daughter must obey her parents and must fulfil her destiny as a woman. This inner struggle is much more complicated and difficult to overcome than the class struggle. For this reason, she may appear indecisive and weak, compared to stronger female characters such as Katniss Everdeen, but my intention was to obtain a more realistic portrait of an Italian bambocciona on her way to a personal revolution.

In many ways, the novel may be seen to draw on Marxist feminist theorists’ work. For example, I have reviewed Evelyn Reed’s *Woman Evolution: From Matriarchal Clan to Patriarchal Family* (1975) in order to get insight into the historical evolution of patriarchy. I have also read closely Silvia Federici’s work on capitalism such as *Caliban and the Witch: Women, the Body and Primitive Accumulation* (2004) and *Precarious Labour: A Viewpoint* (2008). In addition, I have reviewed Marx’s theory of class consciousness (Crossley, N., 2013). While Alida is portrayed as a character that struggles to escape the norms of Italian patriarchy, I could not legitimately have her evolve into a class action heroine.

Marx had predicted that an oppressed class would develop a class consciousness and thus be ripe for a revolution. This premise was not validated by research with young people, and I therefore steered clear from making Alida the leader of a class of young people with a common consciousness. Also, I have not centred the novel on her rebellion against the patriarchy, but made it an important step in her character building. A possible sequel could see Alida challenge gender norms in a way that would be more closely aligned with feminist theories. In its current form, my novel has drawn

inspiration from both theoretical frameworks but remained closer focused on the broken generational contract and the need for culturally appropriate authenticity.

CONCLUSIONS

As I have shown in the introduction to my thesis, the Skills Gap mono-narrative, centring on young people's inadequate adaptation to the labour market (e.g. Young people should choose the 'right' degree (e.g. STEM); Young people feel entitled; Young people don't have the right 'soft' skills (e.g. right attitude) in the labour market) carries with it the implication that young people need to be 'fixed'. Policy solutions reward power holders through tax relief and other economic incentives in order to create jobs. Meanwhile, there is massive pressure on academic institutions to 'fix' young people. By the time young people graduate, they have already internalised the mono-narrative and believe that their school-to-work transition is their individual responsibility.

In my research, I have drawn on this critical paradigm because it enabled me to challenge the assumptions of the neo-liberal model for the labour market, i.e. that participants have perfect information about the market and that the supply and demand will reach an equilibrium. I have thus shown that young people are engaged in a power struggle over labour and find themselves in an oppressed situation.

Thus, via a moral panics framework, I identified the fact that power holders both in Italy and the UK use the mass-media to create a moral panic about young people, stereotyping them as free-riders or as angry and on the cusp of a civil unrest. The aim is to reinforce the idea of individual responsibility and keep discontent privatised.

Through critical ethnography, I was able to engage young people in discussing the statistics and the public discourse findings. The majority of respondents believed the statistics to be true, did not find that the politicians have solutions, however at the same time did not share a 'class consciousness' as Marx had anticipated and thus continue to look for private solutions to a public, shared problem. Also, by framing the issue of labour as a 'youth' problem, what is conveyed is that this is a recent crisis. However, the stories told by those over 30 coincided with those told by the under 30s. Their struggles were similar however due to the impermanent feature of 'age' boundaries, these categories do not see each other as part of the same 'category' of oppression.

My overall conclusion, that 'labour' is in crisis rather than 'youth' is amply evidenced by extracts from interviews (Appendix 2). My research drew on critical theory and aimed to critique the neo-liberal discourse that frames the issue of youth unemployment, overeducation and underemployment. The neo-liberal assumptions are that participants have perfect information about the market and that the market will reach an equilibrium with supply meeting demand. I thus revealed the power asymmetry in the market by

using a moral panics framework, then valued the multiplicity of views and emancipatory dialogue with participants, co-critiquing the mono-narrative about The Skills Gap and then wrote up the results on my critical ethnography as a ‘story’, i.e a novel drawing on the results of my academic research within the constraints of speculative fiction. The factual conclusions of my research are summarised below:

1. The public discourse in both the UK and Italy was used to engender a moral panic about youth unemployment, in two selected events (London Riots and the Bamboccioni incident); all the features of Goode and Ben-Yehuda’s framework were displayed: concern, consensus, hostility, disproportionality and volatility. Through discourse analysis, I was able to show how two specific events in Italy and the UK displayed all features of the moral panics framework.
2. Young people are stereotyped as folk devils and attributed certain emotions such as anger and abulia that elicit moral judgements and fear. In this thesis, I have attempted to show that *what we talk about when we talk about youth unemployment*¹⁰, to paraphrase Raymond Carver (Carver, 2003, Title), is fragmentary, misleading and contributes to a dominant narrative that casts young people as folk devils in an all-consuming intergenerational and socioeconomic class rhetorical war.
3. Power holders use statistics (albeit acknowledged as imperfect) that nevertheless go unchallenged and enable them to put in place policies drawing mostly on findings of economics quantitative research rather than holistic, inter-disciplinary research; thus policy solutions do not address holistically the needs of young people. In my research, I argued that the one-size-fits-all approach to measuring youth unemployment, overeducation and underemployment—led by international organisations such as the International Labour Organisation and misreported by the mass media in countries such Italy and the United Kingdom—does not serve the best interests of young people who are not following a linear transition from school to work while subjected to a mono-narrative that affirms there is an ideal, linear, smooth school-to-work transition of which they are consistently falling short.
4. Underemployment and overeducation are two emerging phenomena that are under-researched but that paint a more accurate picture of the crisis of labour. The lack of adequate measurement for these phenomena helps underplay their importance.

¹⁰ *What We Talk About When We Talk About Youth Unemployment* is the title of the TEDx talk that I gave for TEDx Nicosia in 2014 exploring initial findings and questions from my PhD research (available on Youtube at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hXakEAYOYZE>).

These phenomena are inter-linked, however research and public discourse are keeping them separate. I have postulated that this prevents the public from understanding the complete picture of the crisis of labour both in Italy and the UK.

5. Young people do not have perfect information about the market thus they are not equal players and the responsibility for their transition should not be an individual responsibility but a shared responsibility. Through interviews with young people from Italy and the United Kingdom (excerpts documented in Appendix 2), who have found themselves at different points along Turner (1964)'s betwixt-and-between transition trajectory, I have demonstrated that in both countries, the lived experiences of these young people are much more complex than the simplified narrative of quantitative statistics that policies for youth unemployment draw on. My theoretical literature review has helped me situate this discrepancy within a critical paradigm that shows young people as powerless in an intergenerational rhetorical war that they cannot win. As shown in my thesis, this leads to an asymmetry of power and a disproportionate amount of responsibility being placed squarely on the shoulders of young people. Braun and Lauder (2006) refer to this asymmetry of accountability (i.e., the supply side being overly scrutinised, while the demand side is generally less researched and reported on objectively) as 'a political sleight of hand'.
6. Young people privatise their discontent. They are disillusioned by the State and feel loyalty for their parents' sacrifices for them. They do not express a 'class consciousness' either with their or previous generations; they do not have access to unions in general and thus do not seem to have any choice but to privatise their discontent. There were numerous examples that emerged during my interviews; the most relevant excerpts were included in Appendix 2. However, it is unfortunate that this privatised, individualistic view of young people's situations is preventing them from understanding that they indeed represent an oppressed class, even if they lack awareness of their membership in this class.
7. Inter-generational dynamic: they do not resent their parents, but do resent politicians. They themselves feel powerless. Even when they 'do the right things' in terms of seeking a job, they have very little success and very few other options. Since the mainstream narrative continues to persist unchallenged, full-blown moral panics emerge from time to time, reinforcing the generational divide and the self-fulfilling prophecy of proposed youth policy solutions that aim to 'fix' young people. In this thesis, I have explored two of these panics, the London Riots of 2011

focused on the angry young man and the 2008-2012 Bamboccioni panic in Italy focused on the *bamboccione* or *puer aeternus*. I have used Goode and Ben-Yehuda (1994)'s framework to demonstrate that these events fit within the moral panics parameters, especially the parameter of disproportionality, which refers to the use of flawed methodologies to report on quantitative statistics.

8. Creative (speculative) writing draws on the critical paradigm, i.e challenges established norms and epistemologies. Given the increasing blurring of genres and trend towards inter-disciplinary research, creative writing as a discipline seems to be a natural fit with critical ethnography, that requires findings to be written up as a story. Through the literary analysis of two novels, namely Anthony Burgess' *A Clockwork Orange* and Marco Bosonetto's *Requiem for a Prolonged Adolescence*, I have demonstrated that speculative fiction plays a key role in drawing on societal fears, expressing them in creative form and amplifying them throughout their readership in a perfect loop which Urbanski (1975) called 'the rhetorical circle'.
9. The privatisation of discontent needs an outlet – creative writing provides an avenue for young people to produce their own literature of discontent and speak truth to power. Weaving my academic research into a creative thesis has allowed me to explore the opportunities that creative writing offers for social activism. By drawing on research findings, I was able to show the gaps in knowledge, and since these gaps are rarely presented as a coherent narrative in real life, it is a revelation to be able to use the genre constraints of speculative fiction or dystopia, for instance, to allow a form of coherent social activism to emerge. The characters are composites of people, places, statistics, news headlines and snippets of conversation, and yet the hero is never fully real, given that the ups and downs of real life may not make it into a coherent story arc. The lack of agency that a disoriented young person experiences does not translate into an inspiring hero journey.

Contribution to knowledge

My research contributes to the literature on moral panics, by pointing out how unemployment (and by contagion, overeducation and underemployment) is constructed as social deviance. It also contributes to research on creative writing, by arguing that speculative fiction has a role in interdisciplinary research both from methodological and content standpoints.

First, my theoretical research that frames youth unemployment, overeducation and

underemployment within a moral panic discourse is a unique approach. Although youth deviance, unemployment and moral panics have been sporadically linked in previous studies, as I have shown in the literature review section of this thesis, I have introduced the concepts of overeducation and underemployment to further supplement the argument that the public discourse on youth unemployment fits the moral panics framework.

My research did not support the idea that there is a North-South divide, i.e that youth unemployment, overeducation and underemployment is worse in Italy than in the UK. Moreover, differences in culture between the two countries, unaccounted for in quantitative studies, make comparisons between countries misleading.

Both countries, regardless of the structure of their economies, show phenomena of overeducation and underemployment. Although these seem to affect a larger part of the population, compounding unemployment, little research is focused on them and thus they are not the focus of public discourse. I argue that this oversight contributes to the mono-narrative because it reinforces the idea that ‘youth’ is in crisis, not ‘labour’.

Even if there is no clear future alternative to the neoliberal framework, the key conclusion of my research is that young people need to ask the right questions, demand access to critical information and thus challenge the policies that are developed on their behalf.

Including the voice of key stakeholders, such as youth, in research has been identified in literature as a gap. Specifically, moral panics theorists such as Bessant have pointed this out as a key element that is missing in research.

By conducting a set of 30 interviews, I have attempted to bring forth the voices of the young. Interestingly, although quantitative research is preferred because it is deemed more rigorous, my research has shown that due to flaws in methodologies, including limited definitions, in the case of youth unemployment, underemployment and overeducation, quantitative research design favours the interests of power holders.

As further contribution to knowledge, by bringing a creative writing lens to this topic, I have built a bridge between theoretical research and social activism. The call to action that a fictional hero is typically required to answer is transformed into a call to action that young people in general in society are invited to answer.

Through my creative writing choices, I have thus attempted to give a voice to the voiceless, the most impacted of young people, the most precarious and the most oppressed by the patriarchal framework underpinning the labour market in Italy—the young woman (Murgia and Armano, 2011). In addition, the choices of character

characteristics (such as gender and agency) make my novel fundamentally different from other Italian dystopian novels (such as Andrea Salieri's *L'omicidio Berlusconi*, 2003; Giuseppe Caruso's *Chi ha ucciso Silvio Berlusconi*, 2005; Gianni Miraglia's dystopian novel *Muori Milano muori!*, 2011) written during the period of reference, which focus on a Berlusconi alter-ego (i.e., an elderly man in a position of power). Through my novel, I have pushed the boundaries of inter-disciplinarity and 'wrote up' the findings of my critical ethnography within the constraints of speculative fiction. I have thus demonstrated that creative writing has a role to play in furthering inter-disciplinary research and has an emancipatory function, by giving a voice to those who cannot challenge power individually but can do so as authors or protagonists.

Challenges and Lessons

I have presented the following set of challenges and lessons during the Brunel University PhD Research Poster event in 2014 (see Appendix 3), which I won for the first time in the history of the School of Arts at Brunel University (Brunel Express, 2014). I was delighted to be able to show that creative writing can play an interesting and influential role in the wider scholarly research tradition. Thus, torn between the evidence of research and the conventions of storytelling, as a creative writer I embarked on a journey filled with pitfalls. I highlight below a few areas that have proven challenging on my research and creative discovery path.

Exposition: In the beginning, being able to separate what was interesting from a research perspective and what elements would make for a good story was extremely challenging. The temptation to dump information has been enormous. Through it all, the shining light of the 'dramatise, dramatise' mantra has been key.

Love Interest: My initial drafts saw Alida torn between a hedonistic lifestyle and an ascetic worldview. I thought she needed a love interest, but this was proven to not work in the world of the story.

Backstory: Initially, I wanted to fit all the research into my novel simply because I found it all very interesting. It was a tough process of 'killing one's darlings' that I went through with my supervisor's guidance to enable the best possible story to be told.

Agency: My initial research indicated that my protagonist should have no agency. So if I stayed truthful to my research findings, readers may have perceived the protagonist as unreliable, unrealistic and untrustworthy; however, without self-identification with the character, the reader would not stay engaged.

The Boon: Related to agency, the heroine needed to focus on a particular objective, identifying a boon. But since there is no current alternative to the neoliberal framework that keeps young people oppressed by the mononarrative of the school-to-work transition, it was very difficult to identify an ideal that the character was going to fight for. Without a sliver of agency, the hero would have just waited around for the value of her social assigned worth (via the degree) to rise like dough, which would have made for dull reading.

Self-Reflexive Conclusions

When I have introduced my topic of research to acquaintances over the past five years, since I started my PhD, the default reaction in many cases has been the ‘story of my life’. Even those employed identified with the idea of overeducation, especially according to the subjective definition, and the feeling that the content of the work they were doing, not the title or the salary, was making them feel overeducated. How could we capture these elusive stories?

Creative writing provides an outlet, but telling people’s stories in a realistic manner ends up being tiresome and repetitive. What was worrying for me was that even the theme of my novel, the cannibalisation of youth by the older generation, was often met with ‘but this is not dystopia, it’s reality’.

I often had the feeling that reality is stranger than fiction, that what happens to young people across the world is a silent existential crisis. Governments experiment, trying their half-baked policies on them and never staying in power long enough to see the consequences. Scholars, especially economists, speak only from one corner of academia and own the territory of youth unemployment in a largely non-inclusive discourse.

In my view, young people themselves have internalised the prevailing ideologies that they end up repeating the same mantras about the Skills Gap, internalising that they are not good enough, that they need fixing. They submit to a sort of global aversion treatment, like the Ludovico Technique from ‘A Clockwork Orange’, conditioned to stay put and not rebel because they are to blame for their situation. They are trapped by student debt and swallowed by the machine. Employers dictate what type of skills they want in their employees. Young people move closer and closer to standardisation, to commodification, to becoming inter-changeable spare parts waiting patiently on the shelves of a global labour warehouse.

Young people may be 'cured all right' (Burgess, 2001, p. 175). The revolutionary moment of the global financial crisis has passed. The lack of class consciousness made young people seek privatised solutions to their discontent. Youth unemployment remained personal. Overeducation and underemployment continue to be seen as different problems to youth unemployment. In Burgess' novel, Alex passes the threshold into adulthood and leaves his youth behind. But maybe becoming an adult doesn't have to mean forgetting about one's youth, with this personal and political problem of unemployment, overeducation and underemployment. Or we can choose adulthood and leave youth behind. In Alex's words, 'What's it going to be then, eh?' (Burgess, 2001, p. 75)

APPENDICES

APPENDIX 1: Ethnographic Interviews - Demographic Data

No	Code	Nationality	Gender	Relevant Characteristic
1	FAV01	Italian	Male	<i>over 30, BA holder, self-employed</i>
2	GAV01	Italian	Female	<i>under 30, MA holder, underemployed and seeking full employment at the time of the interview</i>
3	SAV01	Italian	Female	<i>over 30, PhD holder, underemployed (contract-wise)</i>
4	GAM01	Italian	Female	<i>over 30, PhD candidate, unemployed</i>
5	VAC01	Italian	Female	<i>over 30, BA holder, switched careers, underemployed</i>
6	NAF01	Italian	Female	<i>under 30, MA holder, unemployed</i>
7	SAS01	Italian	Female	<i>over 30, MA holder, employed</i>
8	RAM01	Italian	Female	<i>under 30, MA holder, underemployed (contract-wise)</i>
9	SAF01	Italian	Female	<i>under 30, PhD holder, underemployed</i>
10	EAS01	Italian	Female	<i>over 30, BA holder, underemployed</i>
11	AAU01	Italian	Male	<i>under 30, MA holder, employed</i>
12	IAM01	Italian	Male	<i>over 30, MA holder, employed</i>
13	SAC01	Italian	Male	<i>over 30, PhD holder, employed</i>
14	SAF02	Italian	Female	<i>under 30, MA holder, underemployed</i>
15	VAZ01	Italian	Female	<i>under 30, MA holder, employed</i>
16	MAM01	Italian	Female	<i>under 30, MA holder, underemployed</i>
17	AET01	British	Female	<i>under 30, PhD holder, underemployed in academia</i>
18	EEF01	British	Female	<i>over 30, PhD holder, underemployed in academia</i>
19	JEN01	British	Male	<i>over 30, PhD holder in employment (possibly underemployed compared to own aspirations)</i>
20	PEK01	British	Male	<i>over 30, MA holder, underemployed</i>
21	SEL01	British	Female	<i>over 30, MA holder, employed</i>
22	BES01	British	Male	<i>over 30, employed, seeking to switch career</i>
23	SEL02	British	Female	<i>over 30, MA holder, in full employment at the time of the interview (overeducated)</i>
24	TEB01	British	Female	<i>over 30, MA holder, underemployed</i>
25	PED01	British	Female	<i>over 30, MA holder, underemployed</i>
26	AEK01	British	Female	<i>under 30, MA holder, underemployed and seeking full employment at the time of the interview</i>
27	MEM01	British	Female	<i>over 30, MA holder, underemployed</i>
28	REA01	British	Male	<i>over 30, PhD holder, overeducated (switching careers)</i>
29	GET01	British	Female	<i>over 30, MA holder, employed (switched careers through education)</i>
30	MEW01	British	Female	<i>over 30, back in education to switch careers</i>

APPENDIX 2: Ethnographic Interviews: Findings

EDUCATION

“Despite everything, my education is something I can't get rid of; I probably would have paid more attention.” *Female respondent, under 30, MA holder, underemployed and seeking full employment at the time of the interview*

Overwhelmingly in the literature, the choice of one's first university degree—and, thus, one's subsequent jobs and even career—determines one's lifetime earnings and general sense of well-being (see Burris, 1983). Without doubt, the pressure on young people in the UK to choose the right degree at the age of 17 or 18, before the A-level exams, is extremely high. But how do young people make that choice? And what happens if that choice turns out not to be the most fortunate later on? As one respondent noted, education (the first degree) is something one 'cannot get rid of.' Like a permanent tattoo, it leaves scars.

In selecting my respondents, I looked for the mythical being that fits the statistical profile: student (inhabitant of the education world only), graduate (inhabitant of the space between education and work), entry-level worker (inhabitant of the labour market), with no grey shadow between (underemployment, overeducation)—and I did not manage to find anyone.

What I did find are people who inhabit both worlds (education and work) concurrently from very early in their life (many since age 16) and who walk a fine line between accepting underemployment that pays for education and becoming suddenly overeducated once they graduate into the 'adult' labour market. These are typical young adults that official statistics would catch at different points in their young lives (or not, given that they don't fit the official definitions for unemployment, for instance).

The education-to-labour market transition path is not a one-off. It is replayed at different points in people's lives as they switch careers or return to school for another degree. These older adults fit the categories of 'students', 'graduates', and 'post-graduates' and are more likely to be overeducated, but they also have more experience and thus crowd young entry-level graduates out of the labour market.

Thus, the graduate labour market is not a neatly delineated age-based job portfolio that only fresh graduates under 25 can access. Speaking of ‘youth’ unemployment and the ‘youth’ labour market as if it were somehow a different pool, separated from the pool inhabited by adults, is misleading, at least from the point of view of people for whom statistics are supposed to speak.

The Choice of Education

The choice of education determines the path that young people embark on. They have to make that choice very early in their lives and only partially based on what they are actually excelling at. In many cases, their choices are influenced by parents, friends or information the young people have acquired themselves.

Academic excellence

Some respondents excelled academically and therefore were encouraged to continue to university, sometimes through government programmes (e.g., the Aim Higher Programme). Some did not perform well academically and thus never thought that “it was something suited to the type of person I was and what I wanted out of life.” *Female respondent, over 30, MA holder, in full employment at the time of the interview, overeducated*

Some had made clear, upfront choices, while others completed university degrees very late (through Clearing, a process through which universities and colleges fill any available places, for instance). One respondent ended up studying for another degree than desired: “[I] originally planned to apply to psychology, but I ended up in English as a mistake, but it was a wonderful mistake.” *Female respondent, under 30, MA holder, underemployed and seeking full employment at the time of the interview*

“I was good at particular subjects”/ “I didn’t know what I wanted to do”

Most respondents already knew that they liked a number of subjects by the time they needed to decide on a university degree. The exact degree, however, seemed to present a more difficult choice:

“Someone said, ‘Because you like making things, you might be able to be an engineer.’ Because I didn’t know what to do, I went and did it. So over 10 years of my life were spent doing something (engineering) because some person back then said that I’d be good at it. There wasn’t a lot of thought process on my part, or support to actually understand what it was.” *Female respondent, over 30, MA holder, employed (switched careers through education)*

“Another thing that I always loved is maths and biology. I wasn’t any good at physics or chemistry. At the point where I was choosing my A-levels, I was told that to do English and biology was madness because it was...they weren’t compatible, so I ended up doing history and ethics. And that’s a big regret, I must say, not diversifying and giving myself the options. Having a science background as well as a background in humanities, which...I feel like at quite an early age, I was on the path towards, because of how much I loved reading, but it didn’t mean that that’s where I wanted to go.” *Female respondent, over 30, back in education to switch careers*

“I was told I was good at everything, so I chose the scientific high school because it wouldn’t limit my university choices. I could have chosen any degree, and it’s difficult when you have so many choices. In the end, I chose history of art because I fell in love with it.” *Italian female respondent, under 30, MA holder, underemployed (both type of work and number of hours)*

Switching midway through studies

Two male respondents who had both studied biology at university decided halfway through the course that working in a laboratory was not for them:

“I thought, I’m not having this....I don’t wanna be in a white coat doing stupid things with test tubes.” *Male respondent, over 30, employed, seeking to switch career*

“I found it constrictive....You are not working with people—you are working with your equipment, and your viruses, and your bacteria.” *Male respondent, over 30, employed, switching careers through education*

Both realised on the job that working with people was what they enjoyed more.

Mid-career switch through education

In many cases, changing careers via education / re-training means starting from scratch. In youth unemployment terms, those who start a career from scratch, regardless of their age, will in many cases compete, often more successfully because of previous experience, with fresh graduates.

“I think I’ve worked for about four or five years....I did a lot of volunteering in schools....So everything basically led me to having to give up my job and re-train, which meant I suffered a severe pay cut, I had to relocate, I had to start my life pretty much from scratch. To be a teacher, I had to go back to university and start again, so at the age of 26–27....My current role isn’t a job that’s done by many people, and actually, I think I was meant to be a teacher.” *Female respondent, over 30, MA holder, employed (switched careers through education)*

Rationale for Choice

Personal interest

Some respondents felt very strongly about their choice of degree before they started their studies, while others were able to hone their interest in particular subjects during studies. Sometimes, what they thought would happen at the end of their studies did not match reality.

“I believe that you absolutely do what you are interested in. If you pursue a PhD that you are not that interested in just because you think it’ll get you a good job, you’ll have a really boring few years, I think.” *Female respondent, under 30, PhD holder, underemployed in academia*

“I studied English [...] and absolutely loved it and found it stimulating and exciting, but I think I also didn’t really know what to do with it. It was passion and love and, to a certain degree, it did feel right to go through all that journey to go into publishing, and looking back, I didn’t think it.” *Female respondent, over 30, back in education to switch careers*

“My dream was to learn a foreign language and leave Italy. It was an emotional thing, affect-based, an expression of freedom from the school and the family. A question of survival [...]. My desire on an educational level was to get ‘de-colonised’ of the

traditional, patriarchal way of viewing things with the help of literature, which was my passion.” *Italian female respondent, over 30, PhD candidate, unemployed*

Career guidance

Although career counselling was available during school and at university, respondents generally did not have helpful experiences. One respondent, who hadn’t considered attending university as a teenager, found that during high school, “*you were pretty much pushed in that direction.*” *Male respondent, under 30, PhD holder, underemployed in academia*; Another, who did not excel academically and was quiet, “*did not really get a lot of input or attention from teachers.*” *Male respondent, under 30, employed*

“I do think there should be more guidance in university, especially with the amount of money that people pay when they go to university. It should be more angled or focused rather than just have a ‘search in the newspaper.’ Even to choose my MA, that was from talking to friends, and they suggested it. It wasn’t...I felt a bit lost; that’s why I did it. It has proven useful, but I never worked in that field, really, and I don’t really feel like I could do it.” *Female respondent, over 30, MA holder, in employment*

“We leave university feeling like we need to be employable; not only that, but employable by other people, and then you enter a contract whereby you do feel, especially when you’re young, disposable, because, in a way, you are. You don’t have experience, you don’t have specialties, and I guess the few people now who didn’t do that well found what they wanted to do. They work hard, and they really struggle a lot, but ultimately they do get there.” *Female respondent, over 30, back in education to switch careers*

Cultural factors

Role of parents

Generally, parents were supportive of the choices young adults made regarding university degree. They made their opinions known, however, regardless of whether they were informed by cultural factors or return-on-investment rhetoric. Sometimes, parents were understanding of young adults’ choices because they had gone through the same experience.

“My father had a very big impact on my studies ’cause he’s a great literary man. He reads a lot of books, he always gave me a lot of books, so I actually loved English and followed that path.” *Female respondent, over 30, back in education to switch careers*

Other times, expectations were high (but parents were less strict in suggesting a career choice) because parents had not attended university themselves:

“No one in my family had ever been to university. It’s never really a thing. I kinda brought that to them: ‘I wanna go.’” *Female respondent, over 30, PhD holder, underemployed in academia*

Other times, because parents had been to university, the young person was expected to attend as well:

“I think I never thought about not going to university....I think culturally...you know, my dad went to university, and my mom, too, so there wasn’t this question about not going to university.” *Male respondent, over 30, in employment, switching careers through education*

Sometimes, parents have clear ideas about a future career:

“My dad was like, ‘You should do law. You need to do a job where you get paid more at the end.’” *Female respondent, over 30, PhD holder, underemployed in academia*

“My dad said, ‘If you do that for your master’s, nobody will employ you....What rubbish advice!’” *Female respondent, under 30, PhD holder, underemployed in academia*

“I chose to study accountancy at high school. It was more my mother’s choice than mine because she had told me, ‘If you don’t get to go to university, at least you have a job at the tip of your fingers.’ So, after five years of accountancy studies, what degree could I choose but economics? I didn’t really like it, even if I finished it on time with good grades.” *Italian female respondent, over 30, MA holder, overeducated and underemployed (contract-wise)*

Sometimes, they oppose the young people’s choice:

“Yeah, so my parents weren’t pleased about my choice. Their argument was, ‘You won’t be able to get a job.’ And, to an extent, I found that to be true because it’s not a vocational degree—it doesn’t train you to do anything. Unless you pursue it to PhD level and maybe become a lecturer, there’s not really much you can do with an English degree, but I don’t regret doing it at all because I’d rather have done that than be stuck

in a career that I hated.” *Female respondent, over 30, MA holder, in full employment at the time of the interview (overeducated)*

And, sometimes, culture shapes the choices of young people:

“My mom wanted me to do medicine....Culturally, the narrative...amongst Asians...is that you either become an accountant, a doctor, an engineer....It is about status...but it’s also to do with honour.” *Male respondent over 30, in employment, switching careers through education*

“English is not very popular with minorities. It’s becoming increasingly popular, but with the job market and stuff, people are going for degrees that are going to land them a job, like numerate degrees and things like that. I don’t know; English is—people who like to study and people who don’t know what to do, English is good for that.” *Female respondent, under 30, MA holder, underemployed and seeking full employment at the time of the interview*

Parents establish different conditions to ensure that their young adults follow parental guidelines: they sometimes pay the tuition fees and thus have a strong say in the young person’s career decision. However, this initial clash with parents offers opportunities for the young person to learn how to negotiate their way out of a position of power asymmetry:

“My parents were paying the tuition costs for me, so I needed to reassure them that I would do better if it’s something that I enjoy, and I did lots of research on the types of jobs that you can get [...] My dad was very much like, ‘So, you are doing English?’ ‘Yes, Dad.’ ‘You are not doing law?’ ‘No, Dad.’ ‘So, are you gonna be a teacher, then?’ ‘Probably not.’ ‘What are you gonna do? Are you gonna get a job? It’s not worth the money if you’re not gonna get a job.’ He was very much focused on: is it gonna be worth the money.” *Female respondent, over 30, PhD holder, underemployed in academia*

Pragmatism

Four respondents stated that once they had chosen a degree, all things being equal, the location and atmosphere of the campus strongly influenced their decision to choose a certain university over another. Flexibility of the course (being able to change direction throughout the course) also was mentioned as important. In one case, location beat out a prestigious university.

“I think a lot of regrets people have about A-levels and university is being too reactive and impressionable...A lot of people who followed their passion find that they’re really not making very much money and struggling. And other people who have set those things aside for the sake of getting a mortgage...it’s different. I do think there’s a silver lining. You make lifestyle choices...there’s a narrative around the choice to justify why they’ve done it.” *Female respondent, over 30, back in education to switch careers*

“I believe that, if there is no work available, one must create it. People tell me that I had the money to open up my business. But it’s not really true. Yes, my father helped fund the start-up, but then I wrote a business plan and could have obtained money through the regional government.” *Male respondent, over 30, BA holder, self-employed*

Satisfaction with Education Choice

Higher education

“Even if they said there’s no chance for an academic career, I’d still have done a PhD for me. It’s always about learning, pushing myself, learning new things.” *Female respondent, over 30, PhD holder, underemployed in academia*

“As a person, over and above what income I may have, I feel like a complete person. I am very happy with the person I am at the moment...I wouldn’t change, for thousands of euro, everything that I learned, everything that I’ve been passionate about. So I don’t know, success seems to be always measured by the apartment that you can afford or the car that you drive—for people of my parents’ generation, success is having everything they couldn’t afford during the war.” *Italian female respondent, over 30, PhD holder, underemployed (contract-wise)*

Even after a successful education path, it is possible to graduate and feel trapped:

“There I was—lost. I didn’t know what to do because I chose something I loved, and I enjoyed the degree, and I did really well at it. I got a good degree, but then at the end, the career path which is set...I didn’t want to. So I was left confused. I came out of university not knowing what I was gonna do.” *Male respondent, over 30, in employment, switching careers through education*

The purpose of getting an education

“I really wanted to educate myself so I could support my children...I am definitely led by my heart more than anything else, so if I feel like something is gonna work...it

didn't look like it was gonna...mostly it worked out okay." *Female respondent, over 30, underemployed* in the arts*

"Education should give you an opportunity to become somebody, perhaps completely different, or a completely revised version of who you were at the beginning. I don't believe you should leave education not thinking differently in any capacity. It's to enlighten you, to inspire you, and to give you more opportunities." *Female respondent, under 30, PhD holder, underemployed in academia*

"You cannot eat culture; you cannot make a living out of culture—these are the stereotypes. When I was at university, there was somehow this idea, mainly among males, that women used the university as a sort of parking lot while looking for a husband. Along these lines, 'I know a bit of literature, a bit of Shakespeare, what do you say—will you marry me?'" *Italian female respondent, over 30, PhD candidate, not in employment*

Trials and Tribulations: Education Path

One of the myths underlying the phenomenon of "overeducation" is that young people choose to stay in university as if it were a "parking lot," thus delaying becoming adults and entering the labour market.

None of the respondents set out at 18 with a plan to get a Masters or a PhD after the BA. Most have matured these decisions during their studies. In order to afford further studies, many made sacrifices, worked in addition to studying, and sometimes became ill because of the excessive effort.

Overeducation is not a clear line in the sand that people can see and steer away from. It is a contextual phenomenon. Most of the time, this label seems to appear from out of nowhere. Especially in the context of mid-career choices to return to education, the concept of "overeducation" no longer seems appropriate. In many ways, previous degrees are no longer relevant and thus should potentially not be counted towards the "new career" that starts later in life.

Gifts Aplenty: Overeducation

These decisions to get postgraduate degrees (Master, PhD) came gradually, through the course of study. In many cases, the respondents required breaks to save money and afford the next leg of study.

Taking a break from studying to save enough money to afford it

“Towards the end [of the BA], I definitely started to think about MA...either way, I would have come out and worked for a bit, too, to save up for it, which is essentially what I did. I wasn't quite sure if I was gonna go back to do MA or not.” *Male respondent, over 30, PhD holder in employment (possibly underemployed)*

Continuing studies because it felt right

“My grades started going up and up and up, and by the time I was in my second year, I thought, ‘I really wanna carry on doing this. I'm kinda addicted to it in a sense. I love the subject, I love what I am learning about, I don't wanna walk away from it at the moment.’ So, that's when I looked at master's degrees [...] I can't remember waking up one day and thinking, ‘I wanna do this PhD.’ I think I just saw it as a logical progression because I still didn't want to walk away from...my research topic. So I thought, ‘Well, if I could do it, it would be a brilliant opportunity to pursue it, really.’” *Female respondent, under 30, PhD holder, underemployed in academia*

Collecting degrees

“There's a small percentage who go around collecting degrees—if I had won the lottery and was set for life, I would travel and continue to study. I love studying, but I don't think many people have that luxury to do it now.” *Female respondent, under 30, MA holder, underemployed and seeking full employment at the time of the interview*

Personal development

“It's definitely worth it [to do a PhD], even if there were no opportunities. Even if it doesn't help me get a job, I'll still be glad that I've done it. That's, to me, part of the reason why you do it...because I'd quite like to go into that for a career, quite like an academic career, but even if they said there's no chance of that, I'd still have done the PhD for me.” *Female respondent, over 30, PhD holder, underemployed in academia*

“Initially, I thought a PhD is a lot of time, effort, money....But, yeah, it's worth it for me because I feel like a more rounded person.” *Male respondent, over 30, PhD holder (possibly underemployed)*

More time to think and/or specialise before jumping into the labour market pool

“After my BA, I went straight away into an MA, [...] mainly because I didn’t really know what I wanted to do and I was a bit nervous by entering work and not having a clue what to do.” *Female respondent, MA holder, in employment (different from education degree)*

“In Year 3, [...] I thought, ‘What the hell am I gonna do?’ And again you start getting the pressure from back home [questions from the family about future]. And I thought, ‘Jesus, what can I do?’ [...] So then I thought, ‘Right, I need to combine what I’ve done with something in the real world [...] maybe it’s a good idea to do an MA degree.’”
Male respondent, over 30, MA holder, overeducated

A way to change careers

“I think PhD definitely helps. I think in some ways it might, but in teaching it’s definitely a plus, because I think...it is maybe the respect—the general respect—and people are very willing to give you a chance, which, because I don’t have any teaching qualification, I don’t think I would have gotten without the PhD [...] maybe with the MA [...]” *Male respondent, over 30, PhD holder, underemployed (potentially overeducated)*

“I think it felt brave leaving my job because for so long I had been worried about losing it.” *Female respondent, over 30, back in education to switch careers*

What Does Overeducation Look Like?

“You know what? No one’s ever going to be able to take that away from you; so I have that education, that experience....I don’t want to live my life on pause. I want to be doing things.” *Female respondent, under 30, MA holder, underemployed and seeking full employment at the time of the interview*

“Obviously, if you wanna stay in academia, a PhD is always gonna be good, but outside of that, I think an employer would rather see 4–5 years’ solid work experience than PhD studies....If I have to go and work in retail full time for 6 months, it’s highly unlikely that they’re gonna employ me because they’re just gonna see me as overqualified and I’m eventually gonna leave. So once again, I’d probably be tempted to take things off of

my CV. So, in a way, I think it is detrimental.” *Female respondent, under 30, PhD holder, underemployed in academia*

“Overeducated?...I got turned down for jobs because they said I was overqualified, because I had a degree. So I guess if we are going overqualified-overeducated, they kind of understood that I would not be satisfied and I was not likely to stay around for very long. So I guess that overeducated thing depends on the context....Maybe they can think that you just know too much about one thing or that you’re one of those academic types and you’re always inside your own head.” *Female respondent, over 30, PhD holder, underemployed in academia*

“When I can’t get a job in a shop, yes, because apparently I have too much experience. I have too much experience, full stop, to work in a shop. But I don’t have enough experience to work outside of a shop. So at times it gets—overeducated. I thought about omitting stuff from my CV, but right now, I’m trying to be like—I’m bringing all of this experience and I’m not trying to lose stuff to try and get any job....I have so much I could bring; why should I hide that just to get a job? I should try to get the right job.” *Female respondent, under 30, MA holder, underemployed and seeking full employment at the time of the interview*

“I don’t really think it’s about what the market wants. If you don’t like your work, you cannot give it all. After a while, you’ll hate it. If you have a good economics degree and then you find work in that field, but it bleeds you dry—then what does it all lead to? I have realised that I like to be a mother and to teach, so I feel I have a different profile now.” *Italian female respondent, over 30, MA holder, overeducated and underemployed (contract-wise)*

Paying for Education

Young people in the UK go to extraordinary lengths to get an education: moving back in with parents, taking loans, and working several (underemployed) jobs. In many cases, they emerge from the other end in debt and still underemployed—or suddenly overeducated for the full-time employment opportunities that they may find.

“Speaking to a person who’s worked a ridiculous amount of jobs and horrendous hours to make this possible—so much so that I made myself ill at points, I was just working too much—I still think it’s worth it [PhD degree]. I’m so glad I’ve done it.” *Female respondent, over 30, PhD holder, underemployed in academia*

“To afford studying, I figured I had to work for about two years, just get a temp job through the university, and I had to borrow something.” *Male respondent, over 30, PhD holder (possibly underemployed)*

Even people who received scholarships during their studies (two respondents) did not necessarily go on to have stellar careers in their fields. Despite an outstanding academic performance, one of the respondents was disappointed with the degree choice upon graduation, while another could not find a job in academia, which was the desired employment, and had to relocate.

TRANSITIONS

“It’s very disheartening...knowing that everyone is in that situation does not make me feel better [...] I know there are people who are talented and smart who still struggle to find work, and I know them as well. It doesn't make me feel better. I look at other people and think, if they can’t get a job, what’s the hope for me?” *Female respondent, under 30, MA holder, underemployed and seeking full employment at the time of the interview*

Strategies for Transitioning to a Post-graduate Job

Research

While most respondents used traditional job research strategies (job advertisements online), these are time consuming and rarely work for a fresh graduate, especially without relevant experience:

“I was applying for jobs, obviously whilst doing my dissertation...but I really invested in applications after I graduated in July. It was just difficult... You apply to 70 different jobs every month, and you don’t get any replies. It’s very hard to stay motivated, but it’s so important to be motivated.” *Female respondent, under 30, MA holder, underemployed (SL)*

“I’m using all the job boards; I’m signed up to so many job lists, individual companies’ listings. If I see a job listed, I’ll find out what company is recruiting, not only the HR company, so I will e-mail them as well. So I’m doing all these things myself, and I did

check back with the government websites. I'm tracking those as well. I'm not sure if anything is missing. Clearly, something is not working, but it's very hard to pinpoint it when it's not there." *Female respondent, under 30, MA holder, underemployed and seeking full employment at the time of the interview*

When nothing turned up the traditional way, two respondents decided to pay for specialised recruitment services:

"Then I was like, I am just getting desperate now. I'm going to go to recruitment consultants." *Female respondent, under 30, MA holder, underemployed*

"Basically, I tried everything. I tried going to appointment agencies on the high street, and that was a horrible experience... Because I was very young, I hadn't had much work experience. I only worked one summer in a shop, and they basically... I felt like they looked down on me. They were very patronizing." *Female respondent, over 30, MA holder, in full employment at the time of the interview (overeducated*)*

Foot in the door

"Getting a foot in the door" has worked for a few respondents, reflecting popular wisdom well summarised by one respondent:

"I did apply for quite a few, even though none of them seemed really fascinating, but I guess what the ideology behind that was: "If you get in, then you start becoming somebody in that job, and then maybe afterwards, with some experience, you can find something else and move on, and so on and so forth." *Male respondent, over 30, in employment, seeking to switch careers*

Some respondents approached their future employers with the offer to do work for free. Opportunities then arose at the end of the initial period:

"I asked him, 'What are your thoughts on having a writer-in-residence?' and he said, 'What's that?' So I explained it to him, and he said, 'We don't have a huge amount of funding, but I can tell you a way to apply for the money if you wanna do that.' So I applied for the money with the local council. So if you go somewhere where it's new to them—and that's why I'm saying that—fake it until you make it, 'cause I'd not done that business before. I'd read what it is on the Internet." - *Female respondent, over 30, underemployed in the arts*

In one case, an initial low-level job provided the opportunity to get a foot in the door and paved the way for full-time employment:

“The job I was hired for was a part-time shelving job. I did that for a few months, and then...then there was a vacancy for a weekend assistant, so that involved not just shelving but actually dealing with customers. I did that for a while, and then a full-time job came up, and I have been there since.... The weekend job was advertised internally only, and I don’t think many other people would have applied because it was a weekend part-time, so it’s not an appealing job. For me, it was a step up.” *Female respondent, over 30, MA holder, in full employment at the time of the interview (overeducated)*

Volunteering

Being able to work for free, or “volunteering,” generally helped respondents at the beginning of their careers (obstacles discussed later in this chapter):

“I spoke to this consultant, and they were like, ‘You are gonna struggle because no charities really hire graduates. You really have to have experience and earn that experience through working for free.’ I thought I had that because of all of my placements. I thought, surely I have got more than the average student.... I would say the volunteering definitely helped because I think part of the job description was showing commitment to the cause, which was just big for charities. *Female respondent, under 30, MA holder, underemployed*

Start small

In the charity sector, starting with a small organisation provides the job seeker with a faster track to acquiring relevant experience:

“Start off in a small charity and do a role, because you’ll do a lot more things. So, if you get into communications, it could be website, social media, publications...it’s so wide, broad— which is really good for learning...and then your next job could be like a large organization, but more specialized.” *Female respondent, over 30, MA holder, in employment*

Over-work

The concept of “volunteering” remains valid even when employed. Demonstrating availability and a willingness to work over and above the norm (over-employment)

enabled one respondent to switch to a better, more stable job within the same organisation.

“I was basically just helping her for a couple of weeks, and she said, ‘I need this full time.’ So then I think it went from that. I would say that it was over a period of time, maybe 8 months or so.” *Female respondent, over 30, MA holder, in employment*

Respondents found many “soft skills” important while job hunting and during the first stages of employment:

Initiative: People don’t want to guide you all the time. They want you to be productive.” *Female respondent, under 30, MA holder, underemployed*

Interviews: “Go to interviews, even if you do not want to take the job. Through interviews, you get more experience; you get more confidence.” *Male respondent, over 30, in employment, switching careers through education*

Flexibility/Adaptability: “You being able to think, ‘Well, here’s a job, it would suit me—maybe not what I thought I would get in, but I can do that. I can make that work,’ and making the most of it” *Female respondent, over 30, PhD holder, underemployed in academia*

Determination: “You need to be really good at multitasking...I know that this is stressful, but that you’re willing to do what it takes to get where you want to be. Determination, really.” *Female respondent, over 30, PhD holder, underemployed in academia*

Positive approach to work: “It was a situation where I was literally going to be thrown into a really busy role. They had to trust that I was not gonna freak out. I wasn’t gonna get too stressed.” *Female respondent, under 30 MA holder, underemployed*

Communicator: “I guess being a good communicator was something that I needed to be, because otherwise it just wouldn’t work. I think in terms of being proactive, being enthusiastic...enthusiasm really goes far.” *Female respondent, under 30, MA holder, underemployed*

Networking: “Being at uni doing things like student rep—that helped a lot as well because I knew I was good at building relationships.” *Male respondent, over 30, in employment, switching careers through education*

Alumni networking: “In the United States, it’s common to have events such as ‘dinners with 12 strangers.’ I went to one of these and met people that helped me find

work afterwards. I think in the UK this is starting to happen, but for sure not in Italy.”
Italian female respondent, under 30, MA holder, underemployed (type of work & number of hours)

Confidence during interviews: “I think they like you to engage a bit more...they like you to present yourself as a really likable person. If you crack a joke or two, they like that.” *Female respondent, over 30, MA holder, in full employment at the time of the interview (overeducated*)*

Connections:

“I think connections—knowing people, networking, experience, which is always difficult when you’re starting out—conferences, presenting, having anything you’ve done outside of academia....Having 100,000 Twitter followers.” *Female respondent, under 30, PhD holder, underemployed in academia*

“I think in Italy it’s always been this way. I know many people who didn’t get a job because at the same time someone’s connection was interviewing for the same job. Abroad, I think there’s a bit more meritocracy....Then there are the ‘semi-*raccomandazioni*’—for instance, the job I have today, as a research assistant, it’s because my former professor called me, knowing that I can do the job, I’m sure there was no vacancy announcement anywhere.” *Italian female respondent, under 30, MA holder, underemployed (type of work and number of hours)*

Luck:

“So I’d started volunteering at [...] in August, and it was just luck, really. I went for...an internal job...and I knew that I was not qualified enough....It was an internal role as well, so I was volunteering, which is the only way I saw that it was available....Then HR took me aside—they were like, ‘We’ve got this other role,’ which is the PA role that I am doing right now.” *Female respondent, under 30, MA holder, underemployed*

“So the job I got in the area that I wanted to live...I was very very lucky to get the job that I did. I’m very thankful to the school that got me that job. In terms of being an engineer, I never really struggled to get work.” *Female respondent, over 30, MA holder, employed (switched careers through education)*

Working Hard: “You stand out by working really hard, paying attention, all those basic things, but you also stand out because you have people who back you. They see the good in you, and they give you opportunities. [There are few companies that] give a

damn, they think about someone's life and the progression, and they start creating people who are really very valuable in their own right. They don't create them, but they help them find [what they love.] *Female respondent, over 30, back in education to switch careers*

Shades of Underemployment

Working While Studying to Pay for Education

Working while studying is a widespread practice. The majority of jobs are in either retail or the food industry, which a respondent labelled "a money job" versus a "career job."

"I've always had a weekend job. I started that when I was 16...which was a department store. I still work there on a Sunday; I've been there 11 years. So when I was going through my undergraduate degree, I worked there, I'd do overtime, but it's never been a career job. It's a money job." *Female respondent, under 30, PhD holder, underemployed in academia*

"In Italy, regardless of economic conditions, parents would not ask their children to work until they are 18 or 19, as long as they are in school. Maybe during summer. But we don't have this 'work while you study' mentality." *Italian female respondent, over 30, PhD candidate, not in employment*

Besides paying for studies, these types of jobs 'signal' important features of the job seeker to the employer:

"Even from that you just get that you are reliable, you turn up on time, you've held down a job. There are some basics that I had even before going to university. I wouldn't really know what it was like for anyone who hasn't really worked at all. Pretty much all my friends had jobs from 16, just to be able to even have any options." *Female respondent, over 30, PhD holder, underemployed in academia*

Although flexible, and thus pairing nicely with a study schedule, these jobs lead to overwork because of their unreliable status:

"For quite a few years, I worked sort of as a relief library assistant, which is technically a zero-hour contract. In practice, there was mostly some kind of work available. But I started doing that in my second year at [...], so during my undergraduate, and I was able

to keep on doing that—basically picking up bits of work here and there....It would fit around my studies. There was a point where I think I had four jobs...” *Male respondent, over 30, PhD holder in employment (* possibly underemployed)*

And yet, sometimes studying is perceived as just ‘postponing’ getting a ‘real job’.

“People ask, ‘[...] but when are you gonna get a real job?’ ‘You are still studying, you’re a student, you are just putting off the inevitable. You just don’t wanna get a job.’ I already have a job; I’ve got lots of jobs. People just think ‘student’ and make assumptions.” *Female respondent, over 30, PhD holder, underemployed in academia*

As Norm in Academia

“Now I have been teaching for a couple of years, and I know that I want to stay in the teaching world. I find myself from temporary contract to temporary contract. It’s really difficult to get on a permanent lecturing contract....So it’s always this constant fear of: ‘Am I gonna be unemployed?’ You can’t get that state of permanency, or I can’t, anyway, at the moment. I think, for PhD students, they are often exploited when it comes to teaching or helping in research....the tuition fees, I don’t see all that money trickling down.” *Female respondent, under 30, PhD holder, underemployed in academia*

“You always have this feeling that there’s something missing in your curriculum. For academia, I need more publications. At least three this year. So now I teach at a private university, gaining a lot less than working in a regular office, but I’m trying to keep the linkages with the post-doctorate world while thinking of a post-doctorate research topic and looking for funding.” *Italian female respondent, over 30, PhD holder, underemployed (contract-wise)*

As Strategy to Get into the Job Market

“If I was desperate, unemployed for six months or a year, and I was applying and applying and nothing was happening, yes, I’d take a sales job for a short period of time and probably be extremely bad at it. If not, I’d just keep trying to chase the things I like and, hopefully, I am good at because life is too short to do things you don’t wanna do.” *Female respondent, under 30, PhD holder, underemployed in academia*

“So I started working for [...] Bank because they gave me the opportunity to do an internship while writing up my thesis. So I had to do all the data analysis for an asset-building project, which I use for my thesis, but they also used in a report to the provincial government. In July I graduated, and the same day they called me for another internship. This time they paid me a sort of per diem that covered my lunches...I stayed there between August and March, all the while with the promise that there is a proper contract coming up. In the meanwhile, I rejected an internship with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in [...] because I was already ‘working.’ At some point, it turned out that there was really no hope of a contract, because the Provincial government had cut funding.” *Italian female respondent, under 30, MA holder, underemployed (contract-wise)*

Paying for the Job Search Period

“For about a year, I struggled. The job market was tough for me as a graduate. I was doing my job, I was working in retail throughout my university, which was good because it paid for my books, and flat and everything. I was doing a bit of teaching, private tuition. So that kept me going financially, but it was really difficult. I was a graduate, [but] I wasn’t doing a graduate job. I was doing a job that most undergraduates are doing, so for my self-esteem it wasn’t good, so I struggled a lot. After about a year, I got a break.” *Male respondent, over 30, in employment, switching careers through education*

“I was doing catering work on the side as well to get by. It got up to September, and I was like, ‘I just submitted so many applications, and I’m not hearing anything. I have to move out of my flat, so I’m gonna have to make a decision as to whether I’m gonna stay in London or whether I’m gonna go home.’” *Female respondent, under 30, MA holder, underemployed (SL)*

Underemployment to Get into a New Career

“When I joined here, I was on a zero contract [...] It’s horrible! I carried on with it because I knew, I was hoping it would build up to something. I mean, it worked in my case. [I was given a proper contract] when it became cheaper for them.” *Male respondent, over 30, underemployed (potentially overeducated)*

Overeducation

Employers Changing the Rules of the Game

“I definitely noticed that a few years after [more entry-level jobs now become internships]... What used to be a group of media assistants can be of interns, and that really... I babbled a little about it 'cause I was like, ‘That’s not really that fair!’” *Female respondent, over 30, MA holder, in employment*

“You see more and more as well, some of those roles have become internships... When I was applying for jobs and coming to London and I was looking at things, I would look at internships, but then my parents were like, ‘How are you even gonna afford to live in London if you’re on an internship course?’” *Female respondent, under 30, MA holder, underemployed*

Employers Taking Advantage

“That one rejected me not in terms of ‘didn’t want me’ but thought that I would be leaving them too quickly if I joined them, because they did ask me if it would be okay for me to take the dogs for a walk as part of my job. I said, ‘Of course, that’s fine. I like dogs; it’s not a problem.’ Of course... [you are] very naive coming out of university and feeling that that would be a decent enough thing for somebody to say to you and pay you money for.” *Male respondent, over 30, in employment, seeking to switch careers*

“Employers have their choice of people and use that availability of candidates to save money; you know, why are you going to get a copywriter when actually your Comms team can do it for you—everything’s about saving money now. Maybe if they weren’t haemorrhaging money elsewhere, they wouldn’t have to save on labour.” *Female respondent, under 30, MA holder, underemployed and seeking full employment at the time of the interview*

“There was this other experience, a small company that organizes tours of art galleries here in London. The employer was so impressed with me that she asked me to train the other guides, who did not have a history of art degree. I’ve done it, but then she refused to pay me... I think employers take advantage of the fact that we are young and desperately want to work.” *Italian female respondent, under 30, MA holder, underemployed (type of work and number of hours)*

“I think there’s a new trend now which I find disrespectful; it’s that companies now make you feel like you should be grateful that they are hiring you.... They do this because there are other thousands like you that would work, perhaps for less. I think this attitude is destroying us as human beings.” *Italian female respondent, over 30, MA holder, overeducated and underemployed (contract-wise)*

Obstacles

Employers’ Point of View: Must Have Experience

“You get very disheartened because... people in whatever company would be looking to pull employees who had experience, which was doing my head in because if you’re in school for all of your life, what kind of experience are they looking for? Would a summer job be good enough? Probably not. So it was one of the biggest barriers that I could tell for the most part, and it was kind of upsetting because nobody would give you a break.” *Male respondent, over 30, in employment, seeking to switch careers*

Social Background

Two sectors—charities and arts—reportedly attracted graduates from a wealthier social background who could afford to stay rent-free in London. Contacts also seemed to be critical in order to get any position.

“We’d kind of criticized the third sector and the job market in the third sector a lot because it often attracts people who are higher class.... Yes, because in order to get into the third sector, you have to volunteer, which is what I did. Most people, unless they’re from London, can’t volunteer because they can’t afford it. So they would choose more of a vocational degree.” *Female respondent, under 30, MA holder, underemployed*

Publishing: “It’s a very incestuous industry; it’s very familial. One of the girls said, ‘My mum’s an agent.’ That’s how she got into it. The guy did say to me—they don’t advertise jobs very much. If you know someone, they would tell you that there’s a vacancy [...]. It’s a very closed-off industry.” *Female respondent, under 30, MA holder, underemployed and seeking full employment at the time of the interview*

“I think class is not as obvious in Italy as in England, but it’s obvious in certain situations. When I was young and wanted to work to get pocket money, my mother would say, ‘Don’t do waitressing; we’ll take care of you. Let the uneducated do it.’ Or

she would say, ‘You’re from a family that can afford to have you study. Just focus on studying, and extend your youth.’...What is youth? It’s difficult to understand, but people live on these stock phrases.” *Female respondent, over 30, PhD candidate, not in employment*

Age [Intergenerational Job Market]

Respondents generally supported the idea that young people do not compete on a “youth-only” job market and that there are biases in terms of age in certain sectors:

“If they want to go in the arts, they’re still competing with people who have a lot of experience and got made redundant; you know, that was my experience as well. Even graduate jobs, there are people who worked for ten years in this field and got made redundant, so these are the people I was competing with. There are still people like this around, but probably less. There’s probably a better chance for them if they can afford to do internships after they graduate.” *Female respondent, under 30, MA holder, underemployed and seeking full employment at the time of the interview*

“Age should be completely irrelevant. If you are new in an industry, the support should be there, and it really isn’t. Past a certain age...as someone who’s starting later on in life, it’s really difficult. The support is not there because most of the grants that you would get are age-limited to 25. People don’t really see someone doing something as a second career, ’cause technically that’s what it would be. They don’t see it as someone who needs support.” *Female respondent, over 30, underemployed* in the arts*

“In the arts, they definitely prefer more experienced people because they have better contacts, and if someone is experienced in the arts, it’s because they’ve done something right. You’re not gonna still be in the arts if you alienated someone along the way, unless you’re that guy, Toby Young.” *Female respondent, under 30, MA holder, underemployed and seeking full employment at the time of the interview*

“Our generation is upset with the old society. People who govern Italy are very old, but they go through the motions. We have Monti [PM at the time], who pretends he can use Twitter. They just pretend they can use the language of young people, but they’re useless.” *Italian male respondent, over 30, BA holder, self-employed*

“Our politicians have invested in the ‘young generation’ of the ’60s and ’70s—their salaries and pensions. From then on, they lived like ‘horses that wait for the grass to

grow,’ which is Italian for ‘we don’t care about what happens afterwards.’” *Italian female respondent, over 30, PhD candidate, not in employment*

“My tutor retired at 65, and he created clamour among the department members because the point is that in Italian academia you never retire; you retire by death. In Italian academia, the assistants wait for the professor to die, and then they wage war among themselves to get his job.” *Italian female respondent, over 30, PhD holder, underemployed (contract-wise)*

EMPLOYMENT

First Job, now what?

The literature on school-to-work transition assumes the first job “solves” the graduate’s problems with entry in the labour market. This is seldom the case. There are many false starts, and the graduates find themselves going back to square one many times.

“They all have a dream or fantasy that ‘This is what reality will be like.’ But the reality hits when they go into the profession. Some people will go into medicine, and they leave medicine. Or they do arts, and they end up in arts and it’s not what they imagined, because unless you have some direct experience or you know the career networks about that context, depending on how realistic the person is, they might have this idea of what it might be like.” *Male respondent, over 30, in employment, switching careers through education*

“I did that for a year, and then I got a job in a pharmaceutical company using languages. I really didn’t like it. I thought, ‘Oh, my God! Is this the rest of my life?’ So I saved some money and went traveling, and I did volunteering work [and then realized there was a career in the charity sector.]” *Female respondent, over 30, MA holder, in employment*

“I think some of my career path hasn’t been straightforward. Potentially, I could have been in a much different situation if I had stayed an engineer. I don’t think I was ever meant to be an engineer. I’ve been kind of one of those girls that was told that engineering would be good, was told I would be good at engineering and actually—when I got into it—I did it because it was interesting. But it’s not who I am. It doesn’t suit me as a person.” *Female respondent, over 30, MA holder, employed (switched careers through education)*

POLICIES

Info Gap

“Recent studies have shown that students don’t have enough information, and they’re turning to teachers, and teachers...I guess, behind parents, teachers are the second most frequently trusted source for school students of secondary age to get advice about career, but 85% of teachers in this country don’t think they’re equipped to talk about careers. That in itself doesn’t make any sense, if we’re allowing students to get their advice from teachers....A school, if it has English and math resources through the roof, their careers education could be the worst careers education any child receives, and it’ll still be an outstanding school.” *Female respondent, over 30, MA holder, employed (switched careers through education)*

“Youth unemployment—15 to 24. I didn't know that; they need to differentiate between school leavers at 16, at 18; bachelor’s, master’s, PhDs, etc.—things like that. If you’re doing your master’s; they’d have to differentiate between mature students (40 doing your master’s). That would make more sense; this way you’d track. So many medicine students defer for a year to work, so that would kind of be an insight into school leavers at 18 planning to do a long degree or a professional degree.” *Female respondent, under 30, PhD holder, underemployed in academia*

Contracts

“With temporary work, part-time work, zero-hour contracts—as much as they are detrimental and negative in many ways, they still offer opportunities to people that can’t commit to permanent work, or they might offer a job that otherwise may not be there in the first place.” *Female respondent, over 30, PhD holder, underemployed in academia*

“I would make it illegal to ask anyone, no matter what age they are, to work for free, because that’s basically what they do. So that would be illegal. I would say that, obviously, when you have someone who’s just come out of uni and they got no experience, they shouldn’t be paid the same as someone who’s got experience, but they should be paid a wage.” *Female respondent, over 30, underemployed in the arts*

Global Market

“We live in a very complex world, with so many possibilities...and the thing is that the market isn’t reduced to the UK or Italy. You could go anywhere for jobs. The NHS, they said, ‘Why wouldn’t you apply for a job in New Zealand?’ I hadn’t thought about it, but actually, if you think of the global pool of job opportunities, you could go to anywhere in the world you wanted to. You could work in America, in Senegal, in China, and that’s what’s happening now. The world is growing.”

“That’s the other thing in terms of policies: languages. They do that—Mandarin, French, Spanish. Having dual languages—dual languages are quite good, so a lot of people are now learning Mandarin because they see possibilities in China, or they might learn Hindi because relations in India could offer possibilities there. So I think a lot of people who do very well are people who know two or three languages, because with the interconnected world right now, if you know languages, it opens up so many opportunities, you can do so much more, some European languages, some international languages. English, obviously; Spanish is spoken in many countries; Arabic is spoken in many countries; French is spoken in a few African countries...If they have those skills—whether it’s language skills, or modern technology and communication—all these things enable people to see a much bigger world they would sort of operate in.”

Male respondent, over 30, in employment, switching careers through education

Inter-generational contract

“With the pension thing here, it was more about increasing taxes; so although they are probably linked, nobody really looked at that part of it. I feel it’s where the government is haemorrhaging money. No one explicitly linked the two—the pension age raise and the youth unemployment.” *Female respondent, under 30, PhD holder, underemployed in academia*

Investing in culture: “I think in the past years, there is a de-culturalisation of Italy. There are cuts to the education system; education has been made a martyr. I think that producing material goods can give you a finite output. But producing immaterial goods can give you a lot more.” *Italian male respondent, over 30, BA holder, self-employed*

Harmony with current society: “There’s talk about the need to create new institutions according to the society that we live in, so what I’m going to suggest is that we need institutions to help people think about relationships and help people think about their

identity. And I think that teachers should be given a huge amount of support. There should counselors, career people, speeches about people....Just plow support and money and excitement into the system from secondary school. Abolish tuition fees, and reward people that are in love with what they're studying." *Female respondent, over 30, back in education to switch careers*

"There is a saying in Italy that you can live to work or you can work to live. I do not want to live to work, meaning that I want to work, but I also want the dignity of my life." *Female respondent, over 30, MA holder, overeducated and underemployed (contract-wise)*

Is Italy "a Republic founded on Labour" (Italian Constitution)?

"It's blasphemy. Nowadays, it doesn't mean a thing. Let's say it's a joke to maintain this while there is no work nor effort to create work. Only a few people control work creation, and it should be the opposite." *Italian male respondent, over 30, BA holder, self-employed*

"Yes, it's founded on the labour of a few. Only a few people have job security. In the US, people work to live, instead of live to work, like in Italy, even if Italians do work hard." *Italian female respondent, under 30, MA holder, underemployed (type of work and number of hours)*

"This sentence makes me laugh. Italia is a Republic founded on the family—in a mafioso and non-mafioso sense of the word. The family was the one with the means. If you didn't have the means, you had to find work. If you didn't have a family that could maintain you while you study, you had to find gainful employment. Unless you had a family that said, 'I don't want you to lead the life I had.' A bit like the English do now....When I was young, the son of a butcher would become a butcher; the son of a lawyer would become a lawyer. There was no interclass mobility. It was as if they had internalised that they didn't have the cultural means within the family to have their children do something else." *Italian female respondent, over 30, PhD candidate, not in employment*

MEDIA COVERAGE OF GRADUATE UNEMPLOYMENT

“The media has started to show the other side of unemployment. The lady who committed suicide after however many unsuccessful applications—that was an educated person trying their best to get a job and couldn’t. They’re showing that side as well. Where the media are saying it’s their fault because they haven’t got a good education—how can you blame someone for not getting a good education? Because when they get an education, they are a child; they cannot go and find that for themselves, a good education—you know, a good education should be provided for them. You cannot blame someone for not getting a good education. You can say they didn’t put enough effort in, they were given all these opportunities, and they were guided and were given good advice, they were informed and chose not to pay attention. But that’s ridiculous because as a teenager, with all the hormones going through your body, all those distractions...it’s very difficult to pay attention.” *Female respondent, under 30, MA holder, underemployed and seeking full employment at the time of the interview*

“Giorgio Agamben said that we should respect lifestyles that are not led following a purely economic logic. So saying that Italy would get out of this situation if only everyone learned to be flexible, it’s not the answer because Italians live in a certain way, from an emotional point of view.... This could be a richness for the Nordic countries, too. So accepting to emigrate just to get rid of the ‘bamboccioni’ label may not always be the right answer. Maybe a form of resistance could be remaining in Italy, going out with your friends, and having a panino with your friends by the seaside without a penny in your pocket. Someone may say, ‘What are you doing? You’re wasting your time.’ But I’m not sure it’s only that; it can also be that it’s a different lifestyle.... When I go back to Italy, I meet people my age who still have this inner light. Maybe we are all bamboccioni, going to the disco at fifty years old, then going back to the work grind, without taking it all too seriously.” *Italian female respondent, over 30, PhD candidate, not in employment*

“I could be considered a ‘*bamboccione* [singular].’ Because it’s someone who lives with his parents. He is not self-sustaining. But my business does not allow me to be financially independent, and thus I am forced to do it. I could go and work in addition to my business in a pizzeria and make some money on the black market, but...” *Italian male respondent, over 30, BA holder, self-employed*

“I think the media have manipulated people a lot in the past twenty years. [Berlusconi] could manipulate everyone through demagogue speeches, because he owned the media.

In Italy, we are obsessed with opinion polls. Polls say that someone who is a lot on TV will drive audience ratings. A lot of young people are manipulated through the media.”

Italian male respondent, over 30, BA holder, self-employed

“Of course it can be a generalisation, like every discourse. And of course there are people who take advantage of their parents. I have taken on this label for myself because I am still financially dependent on my parents, even if I’ve been underemployed throughout university. I have friends who are in the same situation, working for free for years. Someone has to maintain them. It’s only now, when they hit 30 and find a permanent job, [that] they feel secure enough to go and rent their own place. When you look for a job, everyone wants experience. But how can you get it if no one gives you a break?” *Female respondent, under 30, MA holder, underemployed (type of work and number of hours)*

“I believe the ‘*bamboccione*’ doesn’t exist—it’s a construct that all young people around the world refer to when they speak about other young people. For someone who gets married at 30 and has a child at 31, everyone who’s still 30 and childless will be a ‘*bamboccione*.’ It’s almost more relevant for the traditional rites of passage than for work—more about getting married and having children than actually having a job. In a way, the *bamboccione* is the 30-year-old on a motorbike having an ice cream or a beer at midnight, together with friends....It’s about not taking responsibility for a family.”

Female respondent, over 30, PhD candidate, not in employment

“Who defined us as ‘*bamboccioni*’ is not taking responsibility for the fact that they are to blame, first and foremost. In Finland, you have to go out and rent something at 20 years old because culturally you just have to. It’s easier to find some job that can pay your bills. It’s impossible to find even underemployment in Italy—you can’t be independent financially. Also, in other countries, young people finish university much sooner than in Italy, so it’s impossible to compare the situation of young people since they are culturally so different. There’s something beautiful in cultural diversity, though.” *Italian female respondent, under 30, MA holder, underemployed (contract-wise)*

APPENDIX 3: Research Poster

Stay Hungry, Stay Choosy*: A Dystopian Novel

Based on insights from ethnographic research on Overeducated and Underemployed Youth in Italy & the UK

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Introduction

The premise of my novel, *Stay Hungry, Stay Choosy*, is that by 2050 Italy is a de jure gerontocracy that cannibalises its young. Thus, young people in Italy will be used as spare organ parts for an ageing population, if they don't make it in a socially acceptable way by the age of 30. Through a journey of discovery of the 'personal is political' 1970's feminist movement, my 33 year old female protagonist, Ailda, is in a race against time to save herself and her generation.

My research explores the way social theories that underpin the public discourse about youth overeducation, under- and unemployment fail to offer solutions to the lack of opportunities for highly educated young people, and how the pervasive dichotomy in public discourse 'angry youth' versus 'abulic youth' is used to stereotype the young and maintain the power dynamic between generations.

My creative work illustrates how dystopian fiction, through its process of worldbuilding, offers a unifying framework for sense making.

Approach and method

I derived the building blocks of my novel worldbuilding scaffolding through a four-pronged approach.

1. Life histories of selected young people in the UK and Italy
2. Public discourse analysis related to young people's overeducation, under- and unemployment in the UK and Italy
3. Trend analysis of young people's unemployment statistics in Italy and the UK
4. Critical analysis of two dystopian novels that illustrate societal anxieties in relation to young people's disenfranchisement: anger in *'A Clockwork Orange'* by Anthony Burgess and abulia** in *'Requiem for a Prolonged Adolescence'* by Marco Bosonetto.

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Notes

*Used as the Italian original quote by Elsa Formoso, Italian Minister of Welfare, 22 October 2012, *Corriere della Sera*. "Young people should not be choosy about work. This statement generated public debate and the English word 'choosy' gained symbolic status in Italy on par with 'bamboccioni'."

** abulia is (Stemmer, 2009) a motivational deficit that is associated with apathy, loss of will and lack of initiating behaviours.

The title is a paraphrase of Steve Jobs' 'Stay Hungry, Stay Foolish' in his Stanford Commencement Speech, 2005

Challenges and Lessons: Weaving together Academic Research and Creative Writing

Torn between the evidence of research and the conventions of storytelling, as a creative writer I embarked on a journey filled with pitfalls, self-deprecatingly illustrated by Grant Snider's Story Coaster. I highlight below a few areas that have proven challenging on my research and creative discovery path.

Exposition
We talk to each other but we don't hear each other. How can I explain a x% graduate unemployment rate in a story? How can I make you see that, which only chunks of undigested narrative can? Still working on that *dramatise, dramatise* bit.

Tunnel of badly written love
Is love the answer? My protagonist is torn between a hedonistic lifestyle and an ascetic worldview. She needs a love interest pronto.

Unresolved subplots
This is not going to be a Douglas Coupland Generation X spin-off. Just because all those unresolved subplots need a hug.

Plot Hole
Still trying to figure out how to solve Italy's youth unemployment problem.



Backstory
After so much research, I really do want to fit all of it in my book. It really is interesting. All of it.

Agency
Narrative theory requires my protagonist to have 'agency' – self-determination or authorship of their own fate. If I am truthful to my research findings, readers may perceive the protagonist as unreliable, unrealistic, untrustworthy; no self-identification, no reader.

The Boon
The hero needs to bring back the boon. The hero cannot wait around for the value of their social assigned worth (via the degree) to rise like dough.

Preliminary Findings

Unemployment statistics show that **four out of ten** economically active **Italian** aged 15 to 24 and **two out of ten** economically active **British** aged 16 to 24 are unemployed. In absolute numbers however, there are **1 million (11% of the age cohort) young British and 635,000 young Italians (10.5% respectively) who are unemployed**. It is estimated that **two in ten Italian** and as much as **one in two British under 30 may be overeducated**.

Research interviews in Italy and public discourse analysis in both Italy and the UK reveal the following emerging patterns.

- **Identity wars:** Young people do not identify with labels such as 'bamboccioni', 'choosy' etc but consider others around them as such. Class action is impossible until Carol Hanisch's *personal is political* is re-calibrated for the situation at hand.
- **Mental accounting:** A degree is perceived as sunk cost and loss aversion kicks in. Young people wait for the value of the degree to rise, similarly to the price rise in real estate. Once a degree is acquired, it gains symbolic value, a golden ticket to a promised land.
- **Moral panics:** The preferred way of the establishment to keep young people in check: *the lost generation, the undeserving young* (wrong degree, wrong attitude, etc).
- **Cargo cult:** A shared expectation among young people that the boon will come by itself/granted by the state/someone else.

Emerging Conclusions

Wasting a country's most important resource – human resources, educated young people, should make everyone angry. But then, why doesn't it? Why aren't we up in arms about it? Why do we collectively brush this nuisance off rationalising that it's young people's problem, their fault, that they are not good enough? If Greek mythology taught us anything is

that when Cronus ate his babies in order to avert the prophecy that he would be overcome by his sons, there was one, Zeus, who got away and completed the prophecy. And so no matter how thoroughly the gerontocracy will cannibalise its young, eventually there will be one that will get away and will return to fulfill their destiny.



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